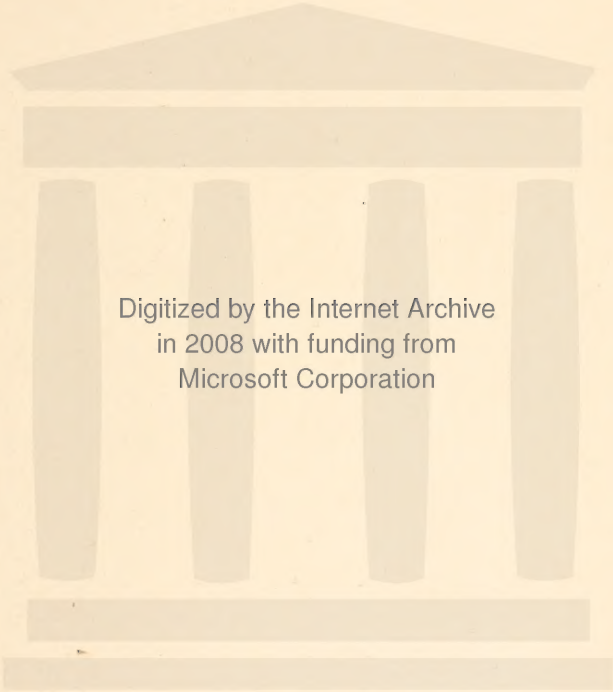
SCENES FROM ITALY'S WAR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The Italian Flag on Monte Santo (Aug.–Sept. 1917).

In the background Monte San Gabriele is visible, and the upper of the two white ribands on it is the Sella di Dol road. In the bottom right-hand corner the Isonzo is visible, flowing between Monte Sabotino and Monte San Gabriele.

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SCENES FROM ITALY'S WAR

BY

G. M. TREVELYAN

Late Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge; Author of "Garibaldi and the Thousand," etc.; Commandant of First British Red Cross Unit for Italy, August 1915 to December 1918

WITH FRONTISPIECE AND TWELVE MAPS

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LONDON: T. C. & E. C. JACK, LTD.
35 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.; AND EDINBURGH
1919

TO

MY FRIEND

FILIPPO DE FILIPPI, K.C.I.E.

TRUE SON OF ITALY

TRUE FRIEND OF ENGLAND

"My heart goes out to the poor little families all over this great kingdom who stood the brunt and strain of the war, and gave their men gladly to make other men free, and other women and children free. These are the people, and many like them, to whom, after all, we owe the glory of this great achievement."

President Wilson at Rome,
January 3, 1919.

PREFACE

SOME Italian friends whose opinion I value have asked me to spend the leisure hours of this winter * (1918–1919) in placing on record impressions of my first three years' service with the Italian army. I have had special opportunities, if only I had had special qualifications, to observe the spirit of that army and the character of the subalpine war. Since the first days of September 1915 I have been in command of a Unit of British Red Cross ambulances carrying Italian sick and wounded from the advanced dressing-stations, as a part of the regular service of various Italian army corps. We had been engaged in this work for a year and a half before the arrival of General Hamilton's batteries, the first British regular troops on the Italian front, and for more than two years before the arrival of the British army.

* Since I wrote this Preface and the first third of the book, the winter's leisure has been interrupted by the brief campaign in which the Italians captured 300,000 men and 5,000 guns, liberated Trieste and Trento, and forced Austria to surrender. That part of the book stands as first written, with the alteration or addition of a very few sentences referring to the end of the war.

We have thus, for more than three years, been living in constant daily contact with Italians of all ranks, sometimes joining their messes, always receiving their orders, discussing points of service with them, loading our ambulances daily with their sick and wounded. Our Unit also had for two years a field hospital for Italian soldiers. These opportunities for intercourse and observation have been rendered greater by the confidence with which we have always been treated by the Italian chiefs with whom we came in contact, by the spirit of hospitality and comradeship in which we have been received by thousands of Italian officers in the scores of different divisions that we have served, and by the popularity of our service among the peasant soldiers in the ranks.

Of the Italy behind the war zone I have only second-hand knowledge. But I have had as good a chance as any Englishman to form opinions on the attitude of the various types and classes of Italian officer and soldier. Such generalizations as I venture to make below are accretions left in my mind by thousands of conversations and incidents, things seen and words overheard over a period of three years, in many strange and many lovely places, by night and by day, in victory and in defeat, in repose and in action, in farms and cities of

the great plain, in the narrow Isonzo gorge, in the streets of Caporetto and Gorizia, on the barren Bainsizza and the fir woods of the Altipiano, and beneath the gigantic precipices of Pasubio.

As an historian no longer under the delusions of youth, I am well aware that generalizations are invariably insufficient, and that one individual's judgments and one individual's testimony can never be more than a small part of the truth on any big subject. But it is the sum of individual impressions of witnesses out of which the historian in the fullness of time must compose his mosaic. And meanwhile one of the dangers of the hour in which we live is the mutual ignorance of the English-speaking and Italian peoples. So I add my mite, without self-deception as to its value, to the not very large stock of English literature on Italy's part in the war.

I am deeply indebted to the Italian army for kindness and courtesy as free and common as the enveloping air, and to individual members of the army for valued friendships. This book cannot be a repayment of those debts, but it can at least be an acknowledgment.

ZONA DI GUERRA,
October 1918.

CONTENTS

ERRATA.

Page 16 (last line of page), "Erzeberger" should be *Erzberger.*

Page 22 (line 2), "Erzeberger" should be *Erzberger.*

Page 84 (line 8), "Bersagliere ciclisti" should be *Bersaglieri ciclisti.*

Page 183 (line 4), "eight and twelve" should be *six and nine.*

Page 222 (line 5), "November" should be *October.*

Page 222 (line 20), "November" should be *October.*

CONTENTS

LIST OF MAPS

SCENES FROM ITALY'S WAR.

CHAPTER I.

THE DAYS OF MAY.

HIGH above Rome the statue of Garibaldi lifts itself far seen against the skyline ; his head is turned a little down and aside, as if he were listening for the news of the battle for liberty coming in from all quarters of the world in arms to that station on the Janiculum. In December 1870 he began this battle of ours against Prussian militarism, perceiving that as soon as Napoleon III. had fallen it had become a battle not only of Republican France but of all free nations against the enslaver. The world laughed at the incorrigible old man, setting out in his dotage to fight once more against an invincible foe in the depth of the French winter. They said he had more heart than brains. So he had ; yet his instinct was right in this matter, and the wise world was

wrong, as it has now found to its cost. Out of the heart of the simple is sometimes ordained wisdom.

Forty-four years passed before the wise world found itself landed precisely where Garibaldi had foreseen, fighting for its lost liberties against Prussian despotism. Meanwhile much had been happening in Italy. Her Parliamentary Constitution, founded by Cavour on the English model, stood just as he had made it, but had not been used as he would have used it. It had given the new Italy a stable government that some older nations might envy, preventing reaction and revolution. But it lacked the breath of vital air; for the Italians, though a Liberal, are not a Parliamentary people. To them a general election is a formality, not, as in England, a creative convulsion. There had been too little real reform, and above all education had been too much neglected.

For the rest, Italy had grown richer, especially in the north; but her prosperity had been partly caused and wholly coloured by an increase of German influence, financial and commercial, rapidly becoming political and spiritual. Not only did business men go to German banks for credit to start new enterprises, but at the universities too many worshipped the well-advertised intellectual methods of the Fatherland. Italian thought

began to run on lines of *Realpolitik*. Italian materialism found a philosophy ready-made for its needs in modern Germany, and mocked at Italian idealism as the superstition of an age gone by. The Triple Alliance, demanding an appearance of respect for Austria, caused officialdom to discourage the *Risorgimento* memories, in which mainly Italian idealism finds the body for its soul. In Italy officialdom can do much—but not all.

Fortunately, as was implicit in the nature of the case, only the jackals of intellect were thus denationalized. The great men—Benedetto Croce, D'Annunzio, Fogazzaro, Ferrero, Marconi—were Italians yet. But jackals are a numerous pack, and can devour. The Spaniardized black jackals destroyed Italy's soul in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in spite of Michael Angelo, Bruno, and Galileo. Why should not the Germanized jackals have done the same in the twentieth century? The danger was great, for no one but the methodic German bagman gave a thought to Italy's material needs. The Inglesi were playing cricket or trading across the ocean; they had ceased to know Latin and Greek, but had not learnt modern languages instead. The Americani were far away, turning out standardized goods at record paces for their own market; in all things Europe must come to America, not America to Europe. So

the Kultur disease crept on unchecked, and who knows how it would have ended for Italy and many other lands if Germany had not, in the high folly of her rulers, called in the cannon to give her at once what would have been hers for waiting ?

In the August of all men's fate, Italy heard the blast of the trumpets from across the Alps. That ancient sound awoke immortal memories. Half-conscious, deep-slumbering instincts stirred. Trumpets had been heard in Italy of old ; but it was not to found a German Empire over the known world that Scipio and Cæsar had led forth the legions, or the Carroccio stood fast amid the spears at Milan. The majestic march up the Sacred Way of Trajan's Column was challenged in its historic supremacy over the slowly-passing ages by the trumpets of this upstart Goth. Should Rome fight to make Alaric master of the world ?—

> " O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi
> E le colonne e i simulacri, e l'erme
> Torri degli avi nostri."

Those honoured stones cried out against such treason.

And then, too, there were nearer and dearer thoughts. Shall we fight against our fathers, marching to war under the accursed yellow and black ? Was it for this that Cavour made us a nation ? Was it to swell the pride of

Austria and to add new nations to her slave-roll that the plumes of Victor Emmanuel's Bersaglieri went nodding into the battle smoke at Solferino? In many homes the old men who remember still sit at the head of the table, or were but lately borne over the threshold. Austria! Oh, they should have kept their foolish trumpets silent, and gone on with their Credit Banks and Kultur for yet another generation of men, till Mazzini and Garibaldi were forgotten, and till at least the oral tradition of the *Risorgimento* had perished out of the land.

So in that week of great and sudden decisions, taken by all men in every land, Italy unanimously and by acclamation declared her neutrality; she refused to interpret the Triple Alliance as compelling her to march to the aid of German and Austrian aggression. So far Giolitti was at one with Salandra and Sonnino. This first great decision, being made so swiftly and with such clear popular approval, saved France on the Marne by allowing her to strip her Alpine frontier.

The Triple Alliance disappeared by the act of its just interpretation, and left no speck of dishonour on Italian statecraft. It was shown that the Triple Alliance, formed for peace and self-defence, had in its latter days been wrested into an instrument of Pan-German

ambition. Neither of the Teuton Powers cared what their Latin partner thought; they had not allowed Italy to attack the Dardanelles when she was at war with Turkey in 1911, but they themselves had attacked Serbia, and plunged all Europe into war, without consulting the Lepidus of the triumvirate. It is this aspect of the Alliance that Salandra so well exposed, and against which he led the rebellion.

In the Italian pamphlet controversies of 1914–15 the following sentence from the useful Bernhardi was often quoted by indignant patriots :—

"The old idea of the German Empire was revived in a federal shape by the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy. The German idea, as Bismarck fancied it, ruled from the North Sea to the Adriatic and the Mediterranean."

So then, said the Italians, our country is a part of the political system of Germany! *Vedremo.*

And here, again, is a characteristic anti-German argument of that period of the controversy :—

"The Triple Alliance did not contemplate but excluded the case of a war undertaken by one of the Allied States in order to establish its own political hegemony over all Europe, including its own Allies! It is a problem created by this European war, *in whose origin we have no part, now forced upon every State in Europe whose nationality is still incomplete, and whose political independence is menaced. Italy is one of these States.*"

In that pregnant sentence we see the transition from the argument for neutrality in 1914 to the argument for war against the Central Powers in 1915. *Italy's nationality is incomplete, and her political independence is threatened.* Therefore she must join in the common war against the Power whose victory would destroy her independence, and who has long been sapping by peaceful penetration the foundations of her " incomplete nationality."

And so we get back to the Credit Banks, and Kultur at the universities, signs of an " incomplete nationality." There were other signs besides : the latent provincial feeling underneath all the feasts of the tricolour ; the lack of intelligent enthusiasm for Italy as a nation among the ill-educated peasants in many districts ; the possibility of such incidents as one that I heard of as occurring on September 20, 1917, just before Caporetto, when a girl was insulted in the street for wearing the national colours ; the ridiculous belief, still sedulously fostered by the German agents, that Italy could never stand alone, but must " belong " either to the Germans or else to the English—all these were the signs of a racial want of self-confidence, of an " incomplete nationality."

To eradicate this weakness, officialdom and State education during the generation of the Triple Alliance

had done but little, Socialism nothing, and the Church less.

Such was the disease, such the danger—sure to be fatal if Germany won the war, whether Italy remained neutral or participated in the attack on France. And, therefore, the idealists of the Peninsula, almost without an exception, became the war party, seeing in war against the Central Powers the only way to save their country's independence, their country's traditions, their country's soul. During three years of constant intimacy with Italian soldiers, my experience has been that in the army men were enthusiastic for the war almost in proportion as they were high-minded, so long as the war was still a doubtful venture. After victory materialists and self-seekers naturally change their tune, and often become the loudest Jingoes.

The War Party (the "Interventionists," as they were still called even two years after the war had begun) was the party of idealism, of democratic and free government, and of national unity—three principles which in Italy are bound together because they were the three principles of the *Risorgimento* movement that made the State. The Neutralist Party, or "Defeatists," correspondingly contained the materialists, who could at first show a good case in favour of German vassalage as the

method of prosperity; the political and clerical reactionaries, still at heart opposed to the Revolution of 1860–70; and the provincialists, who are less heartily sensible of national unity than of local prejudices and interests.

On these lines the great argument was debated for nine months in every household and in every bosom. The agitation for war began in August 1914, and went on with increasing volume and fervour till it achieved its end on May 24, 1915; while the counter-movement for maintaining neutrality, headed by Giolitti, the most accomplished and influential politician in the land, worked in close touch with the powerful German interests and personalities by which so many strategic points in commerce and society were occupied. The avowed German connection of the Neutralists was their strength, and also, as the event proved, their weakness.

The issue of this great political conflict was largely determined by the character of the war that the Italians were watching. The brutality of the Germans alienated the humane Italian nature, and the appalling prospect of the "*Unni*" as masters of the world had as much effect in Italy as it had in humanitarian and former pacifist circles in England. The treatment of the Belgians gave a turn to popular sympathy from the first. The sink-

ing of the *Lusitania* gravely affected the final crisis in May 1915.

Deliberate cruelty is alien to the nature of the Italian. When he is cruel it is through laziness or want of imagination, never from pleasure in inflicting pain. I have seen scores of thousands of Austrian prisoners brought in straight from the lines, and I have never seen them insulted, assaulted, or ill-used.* The deliberate cruelty of the drilled German, his insufferable insolence to the conquered Belgians and French, was odious to the Italian as a strange and alien vice.

Above all, the Italian is fond of children. His family affections are very strong ; his children are never beaten, and the mistake rather is that they are too often petted and spoilt. The kind of neglect from which they often suffer is thoughtless neglect, combined with much affection. Italians say they cannot understand why we have a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, because they cannot imagine any one being deliberately cruel to a child. When, therefore, the *Lusitania* was

* I believe that in some cases, though I did not see any such myself, prisoners taken in October–November 1918 were insulted owing to the just and natural anger aroused in the Italian soldiers on that occasion by the tales of the outrages endured by the populations of Venetia and Friuli at the hands of the Austro-Hungarians during their year's servitude after Caporetto. But even under that provocation there were no outrages on prisoners.

sunk, the effect in Italy was great, and the consequences were immediate, although it was not Italian children who had been drowned.

This nine months' controversy on the issue of neutrality or war was memorable, not only because of the obvious consequences involved, but because it was a contest between two conceptions of the life of man and of nations—a moral and spiritual against a non-moral and material. The victory of the lower principle would have been decisive for generations to come in Italy, and probably also in the world at large, seeing that even with Italy's intervention the Allies have only just been able to hold the fort till the arrival of the Americans.

This struggle between a frankly idealist and a frankly materialist view of human affairs was not the outcome of mere passing political circumstances, but of a native dualism in the Italian character and philosophy. Some people regard the Italians as sentimental idealists, making appeal only too often to lofty motives as the basis of daily actions.* Others condemn them as materialists. Neither view covers the whole Italian character. Materialism and idealism are found side by side in much sharper contrast than in England, where we would fain

* For example, Italian military and civil proclamations and official documents generally.

conceal from ourselves the baseness of our worse motives, and from others the idealism of our best. Foggy like his climate, the Englishman about to act makes an indistinguishable blur of ideal and material motives for action, which often about represents the case. The Italian, on the other hand, carries the hard, clear outlines of the atmosphere and landscape of his own native land into his conduct and philosophy. He knows, or thinks, that he is guided in an action either by grovelling self-interest or by lofty ideals, and he makes no ploy about saying the one or the other.

There are, therefore, some Italians who are materialists *pur sang :* Iago's frank philosophy is theirs, though seldom his vindictiveness. Some, again, are always idealists : Saint Francis, Mazzini, and Garibaldi are typical Italians, though above the level, just as Shakespeare and Lincoln are typical Anglo-Saxons.

But most Italians are materialists one day and idealists the next. Hence their mercurial character. Hence the changing moods of their army—San Gabriele and the Bainsizza one month, Caporetto the next, Grappa and the Piave the month after. Italian politics and war, closely intervolved in one another during the last four years, cannot be understood by foreigners unless they grasp this dual element in the Italian psychology. There

has been a complicated and unceasing struggle between the good and bad, the strength and weakness of Italy herself going on all through the war. The first decisive success of the good was won in "the days of May" 1915.

During this nine months' agitation, known as the "period of neutrality," the Ministers Salandra and Sonnino, with the help of General Cadorna, and with the full approval of the King, were quietly but vigorously preparing the army for war. Like all the peaceable nations, Italy in August 1914 had been surprised in a state of unpreparedness, and could hardly then have taken the field at all for lack of material. As the spring of 1915 drew on, the worst defects had been remedied, the great Russian retreats were beginning, and the time for intervention was clearly at hand if it was not to be too late. But the actual form of the decisive crisis was dictated, not by the Interventionist Government, but by the action of the Neutralist Opposition.

It had long been said, and was still generally believed, that Giolitti, though sometimes out of office, could always return to it when he wished, so powerful was his manipulation of the permanent majority in the Chamber. It was expected, not by his supporters alone, that at the

ripe moment to prevent war he would replace Salandra and Sonnino, whom he had put in as caretakers, and who had forgotten their terms of tenure. It was thought that against his will they could no more stay in office than the first Pitt when he tried to govern without the Duke of Newcastle. And if the question had been left by the people to their elected representatives, such undoubtedly would have been the event. For the Italian elections represented the indifference, the caution, the local and material interests of the race, not their soul, or their higher conception of themselves as Italia. In moments of great crisis that higher conception, the poetized, almost religious anthropomorphic vision of the sad, crowned lady, mother of heroes and martyrs, would carry away a people who are only materialists part of the time.* But it would be the people inspiring the Parliament, not the Parliament the people.

Giolitti's move was bold and skilful. The man who

* It has been well observed by Mr. Horatio Brown, in his article on Italian Political Idealism in the *Quarterly Review* of June 1918, that the poetical female incarnations of "La France" and "Italia" are popular forces, as our female Britannia, with or without bulwarks, on the pennies, certainly is not. Perhaps the unbroken tradition of Madonna-worship partly accounts for the difference. "John Bull," too, is but a humorous view of ourselves. The words that really stir our blood—"England," "Scotland"—the words our poets use when they are really moved, do not suggest a *person* at all, but a mass of ideas and emotions which it would be murder to dissect.

carried it to the verge of success was no vulgar intriguer. And it was, presumably, his conception of how best to serve the interests of his fellow-countrymen; no doubt, too, he was a genuine lover of peace. Our difference with him is that his conception of those interests was not more elevated, and that he should have thought peace worth a vassal Europe and a vassal Italy.

His plan was to call in Germany, behind the back of the Austrian and Italian Governments, to arrange a treaty which Germany should force on Austria and he himself on Italy. This plan offered some though not large satisfaction to the Irredentists, who were, ostensibly at least, to get Trento but not Trieste—the famous *parecchio*, or "something." But even of this "something" there was to be no delivery till the war was over! Italy, remembering "scraps of paper," "liked not the security." Giolitti's plan had, however, the merit that it brought Germany into the limelight as the friend and patron of Italy coercing Austria into due concessions; now the country hated Austria, but feared to break the strong ties that bound her to Germany in seemingly helpless dependence. Indeed, Italy was to be at war with Austria more than a year before she dared even officially to break those ties by a declaration

of the greater war ; actually, perhaps, they were only broken by Caporetto.

Giolitti's plan had, therefore, attractions enough to ensure success but for another factor which he underestimated—the shame felt by all the best Italians, and by all the Italians at their best, at the prospect of eternal vassalage to Germany which this advantageous bargain would certainly involve. And Giolitti's method of carrying out the plan by treating with the German Ambassador Bülow behind the back of the Italian Government was in itself the loudest advertisement of such shame and vassalage. It was that which fired the mine of popular resentment, and hoisted the most skilful of all engineers on his own petard.

The announcement made in the following paragraph in the *Messagero* newspaper of May 13, 1915, was the signal for the outburst :—

> "*The Bülow-Giolitti Agreement.*—We are in a position to announce that the definite Austro-German offer was notified, before its presentation to the responsible Ministers, to the Hon. Giolitti and his lieutenants, among whom, in the first line, is the Hon. Bertolini. So the Cav. Giovanni Giolitti treats, discusses, and pledges Italy behind the back of the King and Government. This grave news needs no comment."

In the next paragraph there follows an attack on Erzeberger, who came over ostentatiously to influence

Italian Catholic opinion against the war. The Italians found that foreigners were trying to dictate a policy to them, and they rose up in sudden wrath.

The " days of May " that followed are an ever-memorable event in Italian history. Salandra and Sonnino were resigning because they knew that Giolitti possessed the majority in Parliament, and that that majority would vote at his bidding for neutrality. All seemed lost, and the advocates of war were for a few hours in despair, thinking that Italy would make her terms as the vassal of the Teutonic Powers. It was at this moment that the people interfered. In Italy the people is, when roused, much more formidable than the Parliament. In ordinary times Parliament administers the country, and divides the spoils of office. But its proceedings do not excite the constant and passionate interest that parliamentary affairs excite in England. The Italians are not a great parliamentary nation, but they are a great democratic nation. And in times of political crisis like 1860 and 1915 the people were endowed with remarkable sense and vigour. At such moments, which form the tide in the affairs of men, the " Popolo " goes down into the streets and takes things into its own hands, supporting Cavour or Garibaldi, Salandra and Sonnino, as the occasion may require.

So now, when Giolitti took the negotiations out of Salandra's hands, and Salandra, having no parliamentary majority,* perforce resigned, the people went down into the street in every city of the land and intimated that either Giolitti must be gone or there would be a revolution. These monster demonstrations of the whole city population contained all classes—the workman, the clerk, the tradesman, the public employee. It was a union of the same burgher classes as had carried through the national deliverance sixty years before. They were now completing the work. The peasant would not have stirred himself to overthrow Giolitti, any more than he would by himself have made the *Risorgimento*. The politics of Italy since the time of Romulus have been the politics of her cities. Although the peasants form numerically a vast majority in the Peninsula, no rural class or organism has ever had the importance of the English squires or the American township, or even of Jacques Bonhomme in 1789. The cities of Italy made the war; but the peasant has had to fight it. That difficulty, more and more felt as the lengthening campaign drew out year after year, was not foreseen in the ecstasies of May 1915.

* Shortly before the crisis, three hundred deputies had left their cards on Giolitti—a kind of extra-parliamentary vote of confidence in the opposition leader.

The army was quietly favourable to war, but took no part in the agitation. Soldiers do not dictate to Italy ; they serve her.

It is interesting to remember that during these days of May the Italian people had no knowledge of the secret Treaty of London and its provisions.

Those who think of the Italians as a passionate, violent, gesticulating " Latin people " over against the sober English, ought to compare " the days of May " in Rome or Milan with our own anti-German riots in London of almost the same date. Even in their rioting the Italians preserved sense and dignity. It was rioting with a purpose, and achieved that purpose with the minimum of injury to property (*item*, a few windows), and with no injury to life and limb. Hundreds of thousands of respectable men of all classes walked slowly through the streets of Rome and the other cities of Italy, booming out with a slow, ceaseless iteration, " Morte a Giolitti ! Morte a Giolitti ! " It was the masterpiece of a people whose oldest political tradition, dating from before Ciceruacchio, Rienzi, and Appius Claudius, is the " politics of the *piazza*." *

Bülow fled back " to the worst side of the Mont St. Gothard." Giolitti took train for his country seat in

* That is, demonstrations in the public square of the city.

Piedmont. Salandra and Sonnino resumed office. The Chamber bowed to the will of the people and decreed the war with unanimity and enthusiasm. On May 24th—the "Ventiquattro Maggio"—now a date in the patriotic calendar along with Venti Settembre—the final war of the *Risorgimento* began.

It was during this agitation in May that the poet D'Annunzio came prominently forward and began to surprise those who thought he was a "decadent"—a view that his conduct in the war has made seem droll indeed. His short orations during the crisis were of classical perfection for political logic, literary art, and imaginative appeal—better, in fact, than some of the dithyrambic utterances of his later style. They were as effective as Mark Antony's less sincere rhetoric in the same city two thousand years ago. They caused Giolitti and his friends, like Brutus and Cassius of old, "to ride like madmen through the gates of Rome."

One of the most popular sentences in D'Annunzio's orations in the last decisive days of the agitation ran as follows :—

"No, we are not, and we will not be a museum, an inn, a village summer resort, a sky painted with Prussian blue for international honeymoon couples, a delightful market for buying and selling, fraud and barter."

That sentence aroused a wild enthusiasm, for it touched people on the raw place. The omnipresent and ill-mannered German tourist had done much to keep before people's eyes the impression that Italy had ceased to belong to the Italians.

In a less degree, but somewhat in the same kind as the German tourist, the too common type of half-cultured English person, who goes through the Peninsula in constant raptures about Giotto, but neither knows nor cares anything about the modern Italians except as keepers of the painted sepulchre of their remoter ancestors, is an offence to the age we live in and a danger to the friendship of Italy and England. The good-natured British Tommy, who has the inestimable advantage of never having heard of Giotto, who takes all the inhabitants of the earth as plain human beings like himself, has done more for the *entente* by playing with Italian children in the villages and gladdening the hearts of their parents with his few broken words of French and Italian, than many more educated people who are for ever judging other nations by standards made in England. It seems to be given to the simple to understand a profound truth that is hidden from superior persons in all lands—namely, that it takes all sorts to make a world.

If the Neutralists had kept clear of the Germans in

Society and politics, they would have had a much better chance of preserving peace. If Bülow and Erzeberger had never come ostentatiously across the Alps to teach the Italians their own business, the War Party would have had a more difficult task. But the German conduct all through the affair went far to prove the main thesis of the War Party, that the Germans were dominating Italy socially, economically, and politically, and that the Kaiser had " cast out his shoe " over the Peninsula. Giolitti, long the most popular statesman in the country, the established dictator, with Parliaments and Ministers in his pocket, ruined himself in a week, because he was seen to be bargaining away Italian freedom of action at the dictates of a foreign Power. Let it be a warning to any other nation and to any foreign journals who are tempted to lecture Italy overmuch on what she ought or ought not to do. We English are too fond of giving advice; but fortunately we give much less than the Germans. It is strange that other people should like to manage their own affairs; but they do. And this peculiarity is very strong among the Italians.

CHAPTER II.

Rome in June and July 1915—Patriotic and unpatriotic propaganda—Army chaplains—Italian views of England—The Garibaldi family—Our Unit comes out.

IN June and July 1915 I was to and fro between London and Rome, helping to arrange for the formation in England, and acceptance by the authorities in Italy, of a British Red Cross ambulance Unit. I remember very well my first business contact with Italian officers, so characteristic of the kindness I have received from them ever since. I sat, waiting for my first interview, in one of the antechambers of the War Office, gazed down upon somewhat sternly by official oil portraits of Cavour, Ricasoli, and the thirty-eight other Ministers of War since 1847. How would their successors regard the inevitable "Englishman with a walking stick" coming in to bother them in the middle of a bigger business than Solferino or Castelfidardo? It was still somewhat of an experiment for a foreigner to propose himself for the Italian front in those early weeks

of the war, when it was still *nostra guerra*, not yet *fronte unico*. The forty Ministers, as portrayed by official art, looked forbidding enough: there was scarcely a twinkle even behind Cavour's spectacles, and as to Ricasoli— !

But the moment I was ushered across the passage into the presence of General Elia, the living Under-Secretary for War, how different was the atmosphere ! He had in the room with him his friend of the same honourable name, Elia of the Thousand, and we talked *Viva Garibaldi* for a few minutes. Then the veteran left, and the General fell to business with me with the utmost cordiality.

There was not much doubt about his desire to have at the Italian front a representation of England, of the kind I outlined to him. These views were subsequently accepted by his chief, General Zupelli, the Minister for War, and by General Cadorna, and in a short time a written agreement for the acceptance of our services was signed between the Italian Government and my B.R.C. chiefs, Sir Courtauld Thomson and Lord Monson.

Rome in June and July was very quiet after the storms of May. The sober work of modern scientific war had begun, and further processions and shouting

were felt to be out of place. The authorities were from the first anxious to discourage the idea that the methods of 1848, or even of 1860, were to be revived, though the objects and spirit of the new war were the same as the old. The soul of " quarantotto " was required, but in a new body. No red shirts, by request.

Besides, with Lemberg and Warsaw falling, the outlook was enough to damp all *feux de joie*. The determined band of patriotic men who had run Italy up into the battle line had all along been fully aware that she was coming to the aid not of the victor but of the then weaker side. May God reward them for it ! If there were those who had not realized this before, they were all sure of it in June. But, fortunately, whatever the Russians were doing, the Alpini had carried the watershed of the Trentino border, and in Friuli the enemy had fallen back on the Isonzo line. So the spectre, that had haunted some minds, of a German " knock-out blow " in the first weeks was already laid.

As an old *flaneur* of Roman streets I noticed certain changes in the popular literature exposed for sale. For one thing the anti-clerical cartoons had disappeared. Since the ordinary Catholic, as distinct from the Vatican party, was patriotic, and had found a figurehead in General Cadorna himself, a truce had been called to the

more inelegant pastimes of the *mangia preti*. On the other hand, the clerical cartoonists had taken the field with carpings at the national undertaking curiously similar to those of the official Socialists, and with a frank pro-Germanism. I remember one such picture representing the noble figure of Germania regretfully shaking the hand of Italia in temporary leave-taking, and saying, " It's that old fool there (Austria) who has made us quarrel."

The attitude of the Church and of Socialism to the war differed in Italy according to times, places, and persons. It is notorious that in neither institution did the official chiefs carry the whole of the faithful with them into " neutrality." But it is, I fear, equally notorious that in many villages the priest, and in many towns and some regiments the Socialists, did much disintegrating propaganda.

On a theme so large and confused as the attitude of the Church to the war I prefer to confine myself to personal experience, which in the army has been uniformly pleasant. The army chaplains were carefully chosen, and—so far as my experience goes, and I have known many of them—were invariably patriotic. The discipline under which they had been brought up made them adaptable to military duties and conditions, and

the habit of busying themselves on behalf of others made them peculiarly active in looking after the material needs of the soldiers, at least in the Sanità service, where I saw most of them. Standing good-humouredly a deal of chaff on the basis of the " Ingoldsby Legends " view of the Church, whenever the light camouflage of Italian mess talk flagged for want of a less threadbare theme, but popular with their brother officers in spite of their profession, their position with the private soldiers, wounded and unwounded, seemed to me due to their work and qualities and not to superstitious awe. Gallant and humble soldiers of Christ and of Italy, in the common grey-green uniform, but with the large red cross on the breast, many of them by their simple daily acts made the outworn quarrel of Church and State seem a paltry and unnatural anachronism. If they had the ordering of the matter it would not last a day.

My belief is that the Church did little direct harm to the patriotic cause in the army itself, but much in the country behind. The same cannot be said of the anti-war politicians. It is possible to select the chaplain for a regiment, but not its Socialists.

But I am wandering far from Rome in the summer of 1915. A change that then struck me in the literature of the streets was the great increase of historical appeals

to the *Risorgimento*. The leading Roman cinema showed us the story of Ciceruacchio and the Rome of 1849. Old proclamations of that epoch were reprinted and posted up on the walls. The cartoons represented the Austrians always in the uniform of that bygone period, with shako and jackboot complete. The appeal in the newspapers and in conversation was constantly to these memories.

One evening I went to a *revue* in the form of a fable of animals. The old dying wolf was Austria, and the bellicose mastiff Germany. The black and yellow wolf, more horrible for being now half fangless, hobbling on a crutch shaped like a gallows, was in itself an artistic creation. We had on the stage Cavour, Rossini, and I know not whom beside. The appeal was to historic memories—what "our fathers have told us"—and it moved a vast audience far more than anything which had happened as long as sixty years ago would move a theatre of Englishmen. Austria was paying now for what she did to Italy between 1815 and 1866, and for still retaining and oppressing Italian-speaking lands.

Another night I went to another *revue* of the war and of the Italian politics that led up to it. There was an Aristophanic political licence, Giolitti and Bülow being as important *dramatis personæ* as Cleon before them.

Such uncensored freedom would, one fears, have been sadly vulgarized on the British stage, but here it was used delightfully. There was true delicacy of wit in the scene where Bülow unrolls to Giolitti and his parliamentary majority an enormous scroll, containing on one corner of it a list of the infinitesimal " concessions " that he will make on Austria's behalf. Some one suggests that they might ask the Italian Government about it. " There is no government," says Giolitti. Then the mob breaks in on the conspirators, who vanish. The scene ends with Giolitti looking round the room behind all the chairs with a match to find his " majority," but it is nowhere to be found.

As the British Ambassador was known to be present —it was a benefit night for the Blue Cross—a tableau had been specially put in about the British navy. A symbolic British naval officer, looking, I fear, more like a representative of the Chilian navy, read a spirited speech about England having drawn the sword for honour and Belgium. Then we all got up and clapped for the British Ambassador to the strains of " God save the King." A little later, when an " Old Garibaldino " on the stage was singing his song, the presence of Ricciotti Garibaldi was detected in one of the boxes, and we all got up and clapped for him to the strains of

Garibaldi's Hymn. Thereupon Ricciotti made us a speech from his box, mentioning his father's love for England, and telling how his own horse was wounded in the campaign of 1866 in Trentino, and how it gave a shriek of pain that he would never forget, and how we should all subscribe to the Blue Cross for animals in war.

Both in Rome that summer, and in all Italy inside and outside the war zone from 1915 to 1918, the touchstone of enthusiasm for the war has been friendliness to England, and the touchstone of indifference or aversion to the war has been Anglophobia. England, more or less unconscious of the matter herself, has been a party cry, for and against, in Italy for the last four years. During the decade before the war the Germans, in far closer touch with the Italians than we, could never get themselves liked, but did their best to get us disliked. Through a thousand subterraneous channels they had long been disseminating strange stories about us. And an important part of the work of the German agents during the war has been to foster that legend. How often and in what strange forms we kept coming up against the great anti-English myth let the following story illustrate.

In the spring of 1916 I was walking one day in the chestnut woods of the deep valley dividing Monte Sabo-

tino from the village of Quisca, where we were quartered, when I came across an Italian sergeant, and we passed the time of day. A more simple and kindly soul it would be impossible to find in any land. We talked of the war. "You English are keeping it on," he said. I suggested the Austrians, waving a hand towards them on Sabotino above us. "No," he said; "it is between you English and Germans. You English want to close the sea to all others." "How so?" I asked. "For example," he replied, "you make the ships of all other nations pay you tribute when they pass through the Straits of Gibraltar." After ten minutes' effort on my part to disabuse his mind, we parted the best of friends —for he was one of the most lovable of men; but I am convinced he thought I was sent out to lie for my country, though he had far too much native courtesy to say so. Who had been at the pains, and why, to teach this simple and kindly ally of ours this extravagant myth about Gibraltar? And what efforts had we made to undeceive him and a million such as he?

But it would be as much a mistake to exaggerate the success of this propaganda as it would be to ignore its existence. The memory of the old friendship for England as the first and most disinterested champion of Italy a nation was a most potent factor. Italians often

spoke to me of it, and with deep sincerity. We had not yet done reaping the harvest of gratitude sown for us by Lord John Russell and Mr. Gladstone. Then, too, the belief in England as a "serious" nation that could endure to the end and "win the last battle" nourished, as I know, the hopes of many of Italy's patriot soldiers through long months and years of gloom now passed away. Because we were Englishmen, we were received by the Italian officers at the front in the spirit of comradeship, soon ripening into friendship when they found we reciprocated their feelings. And I believe that very many of the peasant soldiers—my friend the sergeant, for example—liked us the better for being English, in spite of the views that had been successfully pumped into them by German agents. There are so many pigeon-holes in every human brain, and the oddest incompatibles can be found docketed there together. That is one main reason why generalizations about popular opinion, though necessary as aids to thought, are so often misleading as guides to action.

In those early days a special difficulty existed. I became aware first in Rome that Italy did not believe that England was pulling her full weight. This idea was the natural result of the diatribes which we were then directing against ourselves for slackness, particu-

larly in those British newspapers which enjoyed almost a monopoly of Italian circulation. These diatribes, long since discontinued, were held to be necessary at that time as part of an internal campaign for greater efficiency. But it was unfortunate that our mutual exhortations within our own doors could not fail to be overheard by our Allies without. Having little or no instruction as to what England's effort really amounted to, the Italians took what our own newspapers said as being, not only the truth, but the whole truth. Such self-exposure is so alien to their own customs that they could not be expected to interpret it aright. So long as our army was on the defensive and nursing its mighty strength, it was the German game in Italy to whisper that we were fine " sailors," with an implied full stop there. This misunderstanding came to an end with the Somme offensive of July 1916.

I said that a motto of the Italian War Office was, " No red shirts, by request." But the Garibaldi tradition and the Garibaldi family have played, in more senses than one, an important part in Italy's war.

His is a memory that cannot be vulgarized by an amount of appeal which would stultify any other figure. With a people who require to be keyed up to a state

of idealistic enthusiasm before they can give their best, that tradition has first and last been worth more than a dozen army corps. A nation must have something to remember ; that was what was wrong with the Russians, so naturally courageous and enduring, but with only their long annals of serfdom behind.

All Garibaldi's six grandsons came together from the ends of the earth to fight for France in 1914. It was a fact that spoke in the agitation for war during the period of Italy's neutrality. Two out of the six were killed before their own country entered the conflict.

I knew Bruno Garibaldi well. I met him first at the Garibaldi celebrations at Sutherland House in 1907, a boy fresh from an English school, simple and sedate in manner and in thought, craving only for an outdoor career, and asking little else of life, as his grandfather and his grandmother Anita would have done had they not lived in an age when Italy called to be delivered. For a week we walked the Westmorland hills together, chiefly in the mist, as is the custom there. Then he went across the ocean, and I never saw him more. I remember with what strange feelings I read his name on a street in Udine that had been called after him ; he had changed suddenly from the boy I walked with eight years before, to a hero gone before the armies, a

memory to his race for ever. Who would wish it otherwise? Not he, I am sure. For I know that his deepest feeling, though he talked little about it, was to be not unworthy of the name he bore.

The success of the surviving brothers in the Italian army after 1915, especially of the eldest, General Peppino Garibaldi, is well known to all the world. Seldom has a family tradition, so hard to maintain aright in altered circumstances, been upheld with more dignity and spirit combined.

Alike in the times of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, of Horace Walpole, of Byron and of Ruskin, there was constant traffic between England and Italy in the finest goods of civilization, and, since the days of Mazzini and Cavour, in what we may call the finest goods of politics. The existence of this common ground has never ceased to be recognized, and of late years the historians of our literature and civilization have brought into ever greater prominence the ancient debts of England to Italy. But there has recently been less personal contact between the two countries, since the dying out of the generation of the English friends of the Italian patriots, of Russell and Gladstone, of Browning and Swinburne, and since the *élite* of Italy

are no longer constrained to live in exile in England. At the same time there has been a diminution of mutual business connections relatively to those formed with other countries. The affection of Englishmen for Italy has not, indeed, diminished; and it has always been something more than abstract, because it is rather felt than thought. But it had in our day become less personal than in the Victorian era.

The ease with which modern travellers are wafted and ushered through a foreign country, seeing its sights but missing its inhabitants, has encouraged the Englishman's natural aloofness with strangers and slowness with strange tongues. Our ignorance of Continental Europe had reached its zenith at the moment when we found ourselves protagonists in the greatest European war of all times. We had for a generation been turning more and more, in commerce, in politics, and in all else, to the worlds beyond the ocean, or back into our own home problems, in any case away from our neighbours in Europe—till we were suddenly reminded very forcibly that they were still our neighbours, brought nearer, indeed, than ever, some as our foes, some, fortunately, still our friends. All through the war we have been paying with our life-blood for our long insulation from an Italy and a Europe where the Germans, though more

personally disliked than we, were much more closely connected and much better informed. Englishmen and Italians can never again afford to drift so far asunder as they have done, not from want of friendliness, but from sheer negligence.

From this point of view the experience of the British Red Cross in Italy since September 1915 is not without interest, as proof of the natural sympathy of Italians and Englishmen, and the ease with which they co-operate in work and form ties of acquaintance and friendship, when a little time and trouble are devoted to the study of the Italian language, and when an effort to break down dividing barriers is made by the Englishman as part of the day's duty.

The strong diversities of character, manner, and personality common among the inhabitants of the British islands are interesting and attractive to the Italian, whenever relations are sufficiently close and continuous for the various *tipi inglesi* to be understood and valued. It is, indeed, a familiar truth, never to be sufficiently impressed on the Englishman abroad, that curt manners and neglect of formal courtesy produce a much worse impression in Italy than at home. But cold and dull manners are also resented, and it was not the most colourless or formally correct of our number who were the most popular with

our Allies. The thing that has most struck me in three years of watching Englishmen and Italians together is the quick reply of the Italian nature to what is best and most characteristic in the English nature, if an effort is made to show it in some palpable form.

Our personal experience in Italy affords, I think, proof that the contact of England and Italy might be much closer than it is, if only more of our people would set about it in the right spirit, and take the requisite pains to get into personal touch. For these results have been obtained by men who, in nine cases out of ten, spoke no Italian when they first joined us, and had not many of them been in Italy even as tourists.

The First British Red Cross Unit in Italy, which I had the honour to command, was financed and administered in London by the British Committee in aid of Italian Wounded, of which Mr. E. H. Gilpin is chairman, with the funds subscribed by the public specially for this purpose, to give practical proof of sympathy with Italy. But the Unit served under the British Red Cross, as the First Italian Unit of that Society, which gave our personnel its status, and, moreover, supplied us with half our ambulances. From the original negotiations in the summer of 1915 onwards, Sir Arthur Stanley always showed an imaginative and

sympathetic grasp of the importance of the B.R.C. being represented in the Italian war, in days when the doctrine of the *fronte unico* was all too little understood. At first our Unit was the humble sole representative of that vital idea at the Italian front, the only Allied uniforms to be seen among the *grigio-verde*.* Lord Monson, the B.R.C. Commissioner, pleased with our reception by the Italians, soon afterwards brought out the Second and Third Ambulance Units, and gradually all the various activities of the Croce Rossa Britannica grew up.

The preliminaries for acceptance on the Italian front having been arranged in Rome in July 1915, I returned to England for August, when our Unit was enrolled and organized in a camp formed in Sir George Young's grounds at Formosa, on the Thames ; his son Geoffrey, the poet and Alpine climber, already distinguished for his work in Flanders, was coming with us as officer of out-stations. In the formation and preparation of the Unit we owed most to the energy and experience of Mr. P. J. Baker, the well-known Cambridge athlete, who had in 1914 formed the Friends' Ambulance Unit, and served with it in Ypres during the first and second battles. Several ex-members of that Unit joined us, and proved an invaluable element.

* " Grey-green " Italian uniform.

But the larger number of us were not Friends or Conscientious Objectors.* Many of our original drivers gradually found their way into the Flying Service or the army, and many others were incapacitated by age or physical debility. Our personnel has changed almost twice over since 1915, latterly taking on an excellent Colonial element. But the tradition and the officers have been little changed in three years. As the war went on, particularly after the passage of the Service Act, it became very difficult to retain sufficient men fit to endure the strain of driving days and nights on end under fire in time of battle, and even in ordinary times of driving without lights on crowded or shell-broken mountain roads. But when it was seen that we were doing good work, appreciated by the Italians, at the request of Sir Rennell Rodd and the Foreign Office the recruiting authorities at home treated us with consideration, and finally Lord Milner for the War Office requested us to continue the work to the end.

But I am getting ahead of August 1915. When we were nearly ready to be shipped, I rang up a friend at

* Since it has been erroneously stated in public that I am a Conscientious Objector, I take this opportunity of stating that I am not. Owing to my age and medical unfitness (Class C II. in 1916 and E in 1918), I thought I should see more of the front in the B.R.C. in Italy than in the rear of the British army

the Admiralty, stated our case, and asked if our twenty-six cars could get a lift across to Havre. He left me at the telephone while he went to consult his chiefs, returning in a few minutes with the answer that on August 22nd a ship would take the cars across from Southampton. And so it turned out in fact! I remember the impression this promptitude and efficiency made on me. They must tie up their bundles with *blue* tape in the Admiralty! The war was going badly on land in these days, but, thought I, if the navy and maritime transport is managed like that, our side will win yet. And now the four years' pressure of those mighty arms has done its work upon the foe, and we have heard the iron ribs cracking one by one.

We left Formosa on August 21st, shipped from Southampton next day, left Havre on the afternoon of the 23rd, drove thence in convoy across France, and arrived at Modane on the appointed evening of August 29th, with all our twenty-six cars up to time. A week of perfect weather had been granted us. Night after night we bivouacked under the stars in the pleasant land of France, under the walls of some remote château long forgotten of men, or in the hollow of some wooded hillside. South of Chartres we began to traverse districts that had seen no Allied uniform or any sign of

the war to which their sons had gone. More and more, as we got deeper into the Southern hills, the passage of "Les Anglais" aroused the dreamy old villages, and the stragglers of our convoy were waylaid by crowds that had collected with flowers and kindly greetings.

At Modane we were made welcome by Italian officers sent to meet us, who put us on to a special train, cars and all. After stopping for a public reception *en route*, organized for us with great kindness at Turin, we were taken straight through to Udine on the last day of August 1915. Our extra stores, which had been shipped before to Genoa, were sent up with amazing promptitude from that sometimes encumbered port. Truly there was no lack of efficiency or of spontaneity in the welcome accorded us by the Italians!

From Udine we were sent up in a few days' time to begin our service with the 6th Italian Army Corps under Monte Sabotino, in the zone of Cormons and Gorizia. Our first chief, the Direttore di Sanità of that corps, was Colonel Morino, a strong man and just, whose outward appearance fitly portrayed the inward bigness of his nature. He looked the embodiment of that expressive Italian phrase, "*sta in gamba.*" For strangers in a strange land, whose first work was to learn their surroundings and the system of which they were

to be a part, no better friend and father could have been found.

In those early days we were also much indebted to Commendatore Ernesto Nathan. One of the most prominent retired politicians of Italy, formerly twice mayor of Rome in famous and controversial tenures of office, Nathan, when war broke out, was bowed with age and weakness of the heart such as would have kept any ordinary patriot at home. But he went up into the high Alps, a volunteer *sotto-tenente*, truly the most remarkable of " subs ! " When we arrived on the scene he was brought down from the mountains, attached to the Army Corps Staff at Cormons, and given, among other works, the congenial task of watching over the welfare of the Inglesi—one of the many bits of tactful kindness shown us by the authorities. I had known Nathan before, in his office on the Capitol ; but not till I met him on this more intimate footing in Cormons did I realize at their full human worth his humour, shrewdness, and kindness, his burning patriotism for Italy, and for the freedom of the world. Too soon his heart failed, and the doctors carried him off, an unwilling captive, to Rome.

CHAPTER III.

THE ISONZO FRONT, 1915–1916.

Monte Sabotino—The Quisca road—The bad winter—Battle and cholera—The King—Mountain roads and road-making—The *genio*—Fiats and mules.

THE frontier of three hundred miles of high Alps, extending in an undulating line from the Stelvio, on the Swiss border, down by Lago di Garda, up again through the Carnic, and down again to the Julian Alps, had been rushed in the first days of the war. The Italians had secured for themselves good positions on the enemy side of the watershed, which gave them a sense of security behind the back of their offensive on the more practicable Isonzo front. Neither party, until the Austrians in May 1916, attempted any serious advance anywhere on the immense stretch of the higher Alps.

The southernmost Alpine giant, Monte Nero, towers high above Caporetto and Tolmino. Its capture by the Alpini in June 1915, one of the finest feats in the whole

SWITZERLAND
11
12
47
46
45
T Y R O L
TRENTINO
I T A L Y
Oetzthaler Alpen
Pusterthal
Venetian Alps
Brenner
Gries
Olperer
Sterzing
Jaufen P.
Meran
Bozen
Brixen
Klausen
Franzensfeste
St. Lorenzen
Toblach
Innichen
Sexten
Hohe Gaisl
Defereggen
Mitterdorf
Lower Tarasp
Zernetz
Ofen P.
Umbrail Pass
Bormio
Sondalo
Tirano
Edolo
Ortler
Nauders
Mals
Glurns
Schlanders
Wild Sp.
Hochwild Sp.
Vent
Solden
Sellajoch
Marmolata
Moena
Cavalese
Predazzo
Fleims
Primiero
Agordo
Cortina
Sorapis
Pieve di Cadore
Belluno
Feltre
Mt. Adamello
Pinzolo
Tione
Trent
Pergine
Levico
Neumarkt
Branzoll
Mezzolombardo
Roveredo
Riva
Arco
Mori
Lago di Garda
Salò
Gargnano
Limone
Breno
Bagolino
Brescia
Desenzano
Peschiera
Bussolengo
Sermione
VERONA
Villafranca
Custozza
Solferino
Castiglione
Volta
Asiago
Sette Comuni
Schio
Thiene
Bassano
Marostica
Valdagno
Recoaro
Vicenza
Castelfranco
Cittadella
Montebelluna
Asolo
Vittorio
Conegliano
Treviso
Istrana
Mestre
Dolo
Stra
PADUA
Piove
Chioggia
Monselice
Este
Montagnana
Legnago
Lonigo
Cologna
Bovolone
Cerea
Nogara
Mantua
Castellucchio
Marcaria
Bozzolo
Sabbioneta
Casalmaggiore
Viadana
Guastalla
Suzzara
Gonzaga
Borgoforte
Ostiglia
Revere
Sermide
Mirandola
Concordia
Finale
Cento
Carpi
Correggio
MODENA
REGGIO
PARMA
Colorno
Brescello
Sorbolo
Novellara
Rolo
Bondeno
FERRARA
Pontelagoscuro
Occhiobello
Polesella
Rovigo
Badia
Lendinara
Cavarzere
Adria
Loreo
Crespino
Ariano
Mesola
Copparo
Codigoro
Comacchio
Argenta
Portomaggiore
Ostellato
R. Adige
R. Po
R. Reno
R. Mincio
R. Oglio
R. Chiese
R. Brenta
R. Piave
Laguna
Scale of Miles
0
10
20
30
40
50

Map I.—The Zone of War.

Bartholomew Edin.

European war, aroused the almost incredulous admiration of Lord Kitchener when he saw its precipitous cliffs during his visit that November. Thence down to the sea the mountains are relatively lower. For at Tolmino the Isonzo plunges southwards into a deep gorge between wooded hills only some 2,000 feet high —that is to say, as high as the higher Lake mountains of England, and, on the average, as steep. After turning the shoulder of Monte Sabotino, the clear blue stream rushes out into the little plain, girt by fruit-bearing hills, where lies the city of Gorizia.

Behind this gorge of the Middle Isonzo the Austrians had retired, as behind a deep moat ready dug for them by nature. But where the river begins to debouch into the plain they had kept on the Italian bank two strong outposts, Monte Sabotino and the wooded Oslavia-Podgora ridge. They held them till August 1916 against a series of the fiercest attacks, and so long as they held them they could continue to occupy Gorizia. Farther to the south, while the Lower Isonzo wanders off through the great plain of Aquileia to the sea, the bare tableland of the Carso protected the more direct approaches to Trieste. Such were the scenes famous now for ever in Italian history, where hundreds of thousands of the best youth of Italy shed their blood in

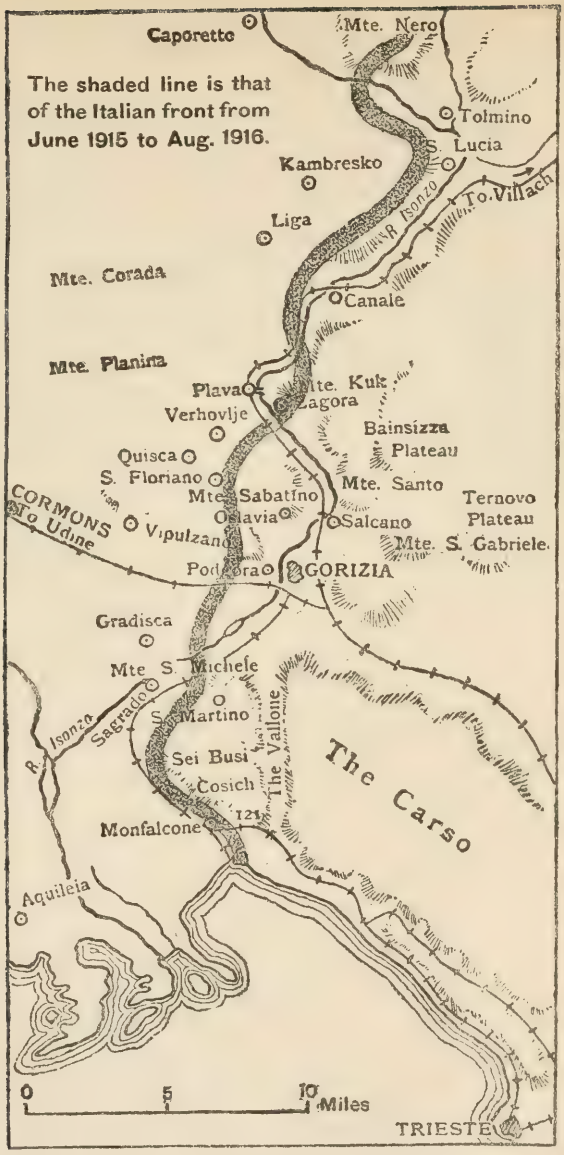
MAP II.—General Map of the Eastern Frontier.

(Line of old political boundary marked.)

attacks that were not fruitless, for a cause which time has crowned with success.

Our cars, in the first days of September 1915, were sent up to be stationed, some at Quisca over against Monte Sabotino, and some at Vipulzano for the service of the Podgora fighting. In those two villages they remained quartered till they went on into Gorizia in the days of its capture.

When the Italian war broke out, Sabotino was a stronghold of nature and of art. On the side towards the Isonzo gorge, of which we saw much at a later date, it fell in wooded precipices straight down into the river. But on the side which in 1915 faced the Italian outposts, the mountain presented a glacis of limestone rock sloping away to east and south from its triangular summit. Athwart this immense natural glacis the Austrians had, during the months of Italian neutrality, blasted out in the limestone surface a deep trench, which the Italians called *par excellence* the *trincerone*. They had also hollowed out for themselves great chambers in the rock, where thousands of men could shelter during the preliminary bombardments of twenty-four or forty-eight hours' duration, which in those early days of the war always preceded attack. Against these previously prepared defences the Italians on the open glacis of the



MAP III.—The Isonzo Front, June 1915 to August 1916.

mountain had to push forward such trenches as they could improvise, scraping them out in the interstices of the rocks, or piling loose stones into walls like the roughest of those on our own northern moors. It was a contest on unequal terms.

These operations on the face of the mountain we used to watch from the vineyards behind our house at Quisca, two miles from Sabotino as the crow flies across a deep valley of chestnut woods. The Austrians were always invisible, deep in their *trincerone* and its communicating passages. But we could see the Italian outposts crouching behind their stone walls, and on the occasions when anybody moved in the open—that is, on the days of Italian attack at sunset—we could see every figure with absolute distinctness till night obscured the scene.

In the other direction we looked from our perch at Quisca over as fair a view as there was in any zone of war : fruit-laden hills in the foreground falling steeply away to Cormons and the great plain ; the plain itself in its vastness, broken in the distance only by the giant campanile of Aquileia and by the silver windings of the Lower Isonzo ; the Carso and its puffs of shell smoke ; Podgora ridge, green with waving woods in the summer when the Italians first came, but already stripped and

scarred by shell fire into a brown-red hue, catching the eye from far; and the quiet Adriatic bounding the scene where so many myriads were transacting so strange a business.

Indeed, from Quisca so large a strip of the European war-line was visible at a glance that in mental vision one saw it all, from the Flanders flats to the foothills of Jura; jumping peaceful Switzerland, on again from Stelvio snows to here; and then, far to the north, the wavering, shifting line of misery rolling back and back over the infinite Russian steppes. One sat above, like Thomas Hardy over his Napoleonic puppet-show. Was this too as purposeless as that had been? Would it leave that mere bitter memory, but vaster far, for the poets of a later age to mourn over in melodious outcries against deaf heaven and the senseless gods? Our faith was that this time it was far other. Even Hardy shared that faith with us. This time it was the Peoples warring the last great war to tame and bind the Dynasts. We had only to win! It would be no Leipzig this time, enslaving while it freed.

But winning just then was so horribly dubious, with that still shifting line on the Russian steppes and in martyred Serbia. And when Hardy's spectator cast his visionary eye over the waste Atlantic, he saw, indeed,

the English guardships and the ships of England going through the wreaths of spray, but beyond, where most he strained his eye to see the shore of a mighty nation astir, was still mere rolling cloud-swathe over a hidden land. Behind that ominous, bright cloud, what was the Great Scene-shifter preparing for the fifth act of Hardy's new world-drama, "The Peoples"? The cloud lay impenetrable on Columbia's shores. The scene moved heavily back to Quisca street and the murmured talk of Italian muleteers in the night.

We were still, little as we thought it, only at the beginning of the second act. And modern war in 1915 was still in its infancy: though Sabotino was one of the most important theatres of Italian operations, the force of artillery on either side was still very small in numbers and calibre, judged by the standard of two years later. The *trincerone* suffered little from the prolonged bombardments of that winter. The Austrians in reply shelled our road, and their fire broke up most of the houses and hamlets along it, except only that half of Quisca in which we and our friends of the 4th Italian Sanità section lived, which was protected from enemy sight by a knoll.

But the wonder is that the Austrians did not contrive to do more harm to this road, then the one and only

means the Italians had of feeding their battle-line against Sabotino and Oslavia. A more exposed artery of traffic it would be difficult to imagine. For most of the way from San Martino through Quisca to San Floriano it ran along the top of a ridge in full sight of the enemy on Sabotino, and before July 1916 there was no screening. Sometimes they stopped all passage by a few hours' steady shelling on one spot ; but then, just when things were beginning to be serious for the Italian communications, they would turn their attention somewhere else, and allow the road to be mended and traffic to be resumed.

The bulk of the Italian supplies, of course, came up after dusk. The most difficult task which our ambulances had to perform that winter was to make their way to and fro between Quisca and Cormons through the blocked mules, lorries, and infantry, in the utter darkness and rain of the winter nights, when to show a light would be to invoke danger for all. The mountain road, constructed for peasants' carts, not for the traffic of an army, had not yet been taken in hand by the *genio* (engineers). It was in places extremely narrow, it was often from one to two feet deep in greasy mud, and it wound in sharp curves along the side of twenty- to forty-foot drops. Those of our number who had been in Flanders the

winter before said that the driving from Quisca was far more difficult and the roads much worse.

For hours every night it was impossible to get a move on at all in the one narrow street of Quisca, where the up-coming and down-going columns of lorries and mules met each other punctual as the clock every night at ten, and held each other up for hours. Night after night I used to call in our good friends the Italian officers of the 4th Sezione Sanità to help untangle the coil in which our ambulances were bound. The line thus held fast often stretched a good mile on either side of the village. Every one was extraordinarily patient and good-natured, as the Italian way is—too much so, we sometimes thought. Why the Austrians never fired at night on this helpless target I cannot conceive. They had the range of the road to a hair's-breadth.

As to road management, it is an English speciality, or obsession. The blood of the coaching days runs in our veins, and we each carry across the sea the soul of a Piccadilly policeman. "*Cœlum non animum mutant.*" The Italian Carabinieri—whose cocked hats are now familiar to many in our island since the famous visit of their band—have the finest tradition of any standing military police force in the world. They are men picked among their fellows—just, fearless in the presence of

authority, and altogether good to deal with, as we often found. They had, in our eyes, one failing only: they did not understand road management. But that too some of them learned from the British army in 1918, and I hope the art will spread through Italy after the war.

In daylight our ambulances were among the chief users of the road, and often had to run the gauntlet. The enemy could see the red cross clearly enough, but cared no more about it on cars than on the dressing-stations and field hospitals, which they systematically destroyed along the same road. Respect for the Red Cross seems to vary with the artillery colonel, or, perhaps, with the general of division. When the enemy were on Santa Caterina and San Gabriele in 1917, our cars ran daily beyond Gorizia to Salcano at the foot of these mountains safely in open daylight, when nothing else could start with impunity before nightfall. It was not so on the Quisca road, nor always so near Gorizia. Men vary in humanity, in the Austrian army as elsewhere.

A curious legend grew up this first winter among our Italian friends at Quisca. I have since been told the apocryphal story half a dozen times by different Italian officers in different zones of the war. The legend is that one of our drivers carrying Austrian wounded was

shelled ; that he accordingly stopped the car, and when the inmates clamoured to him in their strange tongues to go on, he lit his pipe, and told them that he would wait with them under fire for five minutes, in order that when they returned to Austria they might tell their people that the Austrian artillery really did fire on ambulances !

On October 19, 1915, the Italian preliminary bombardment began on Monte Sabotino, and till the end of November a prolonged winter offensive was sustained against all the positions protecting Gorizia. It was the least successful of all the great Italian offensives ; but for a display of sustained gallantry by hundreds of thousands, under heavy losses and most discouraging conditions of cholera and winter weather, it was a story of which any race could well be proud. How often in the chill October sunsets I watched from Quisca hill the Granatieri moving forward from behind their stone walls across the glacis of Sabotino into the falling cloud of night and doom ; then in a few hours the tide of stretchers began to arrive in the courtyard of the old eighteenth-century *Schloss* where the section worked, dressing the wounded as they came in, and loading them into our cars for Cormons. By midnight the

whole place was littered with hundreds of prostrate, mangled forms, among whom the devoted surgeons, sleepless for days and nights on end, worked themselves far beyond their strength in the struggle to keep level with the insistent flood; and always towards dawn, amid the grim scene, made grimmer by the cold, returning twilight, the discouraging rumour from the front ran round—" è andato male." Yes, badly has it gone, my brave friends, for the time, but not vainly; 1918 shall make amends for 1915, and without your sacrifice now the final victory can never be bought.

In November, as the offensive still continued, renewed again and again, our cars worked farther along the road towards the Italian artillery centre of San Floriano, to fetch in cases from a series of dressing-stations and cholera collecting centres at the front, which in the course of the month were one after the other destroyed by the enemy's fire. The cholera, derived from the enemy's trenches in this zone,* was at its worst, the victims dying in agony often in forty-eight or twenty-four hours, and the battle was raging

* The Austrians had also brought cholera with them into Serbia during their unsuccessful invasion in the autumn of 1914. Fortunately it did not spread among the Serbians—almost the only plague that did not that winter. But in December 1914, at Shabatz on the Danube, I saw houses recently evacuated by the Austrians marked in German as reserved for cholera.

all the time. The difficulty of coping with the plague in the shell-broken hamlets at the front was great; there were spacious cholera hospitals provided below in the plain, but the difficulty was to get the patients down off the hills in the then state of the roads and the shortage of working ambulances which the state of the roads produced. Up at the front it was impossible to provide for the patients. I remember entering the door of a church, and finding myself alone in company with twenty men lying on the bare ground in various attitudes of despair. On looking more carefully, I saw that fifteen were dead, and the remainder just dying of cholera, too far gone even to roll an eye asking for aid. The symbols of religion looked down on this silent section of the floor of hell; it was like the scene of an allegory from Chaucer or the "Faerie Queene."

There was little of the glamour and glory of the Ventiquattro Maggio about these scenes, and I remember a cartload of stricken wretches as they arrived at one of these pest-houses crying out in bitter mockery, "Viva la guerra!" and cursing those who had drawn Italy in. It was in these nights of mud and blood up on the San Floriano ridge that I first got an insight into the undercurrent of feeling against the war among the peasant soldiers, gallantly as they were fighting and

bravely as they were enduring incredible hardships. I wondered forebodingly whether they could stand it for another year. They stood it for two more years before Caporetto, and recovered again after that. It is their endurance and recovery which need "explaining"—not Caporetto. There was no such terrorism to hold the army together as held together the Austrian army. The explanation is that, in spite of a very defective political education and much side-tracking by enemy influences, the Italian peasant at bottom loves his country, and is hardy and much enduring in body and in mind.

Every one was doing his best; but for awhile the number of victims of plague and battle together outran all possible provision in that well-nigh roadless hill region. I remember a ruined farm, in full view of the enemy on Sabotino, in and around which the cholera patients used to lie in scores; one of our cars alone carried eighty-five patients from the ill-omened spot to Quisca in one long winter's night, the driver searching about with his torch to find the cases, and helping them into the car when found. On the other side of the road there stood another house, where the surgeons gallantly struggled to deal with the constant stream of arriving wounded. On November 28th the well-beloved medical Captain Perusini, one of an Irredentist patriot

family that has paid dear for love of Italy, and one of our best friends, was mortally wounded at his post, standing beside our men in the doorway of that house. A few minutes later another shell brought down half the house on the top of the wounded inside it.

I recall those weeks of winter battle as having much the same effect on my senses as Irving's staging of "Macbeth"—scene after scene of dark days, dark nights, rain, mist, mud, through which loom out and disappear shrouded figures of the dead, the wounded, and the plague-stricken, amid the smell of chemical destructives and houses freshly ruined.

Finally, in the first week of December a Scotch mist —*nebbia Inglese* the Italians call it—settled down and lay immovable on the scene of strife and misery, and the Italians reluctantly admitted that Gorizia must wait till next year.

A familiar sight on the roads at the front during this arduous winter was a simple touring car crowded with six or seven Italian officers, one of whom was the King. Every one knew that Victor Emmanuel and his family and relations were doing their duty at the front. No one has ever called a member of the Casa Savoia *imboscato*, and that has negatively been a political asset of

great consequence. Further, the soldiers found out that the King was a thorough democrat, both politically and humanly; that his heart was touched by their sufferings and sacrifices, a point about which they were always liable to be suspicious in the case of army commanders. About the King, at any rate, there was nothing haughty or remote. His constant perambulation of the front was his way of thanking the army. Quiet and shy, with an "English" manner which has oddly distinguished several of the makers of modern Italy, he none the less knew how to make himself respected and loved. Duty and democracy are his two watchwords, not a bad combination for a soldier king nowadays. His dislike of the theatrical and politically pretentious side of the "All Highest" business has proved, dynastically and otherwise, the safest line after all. The difference between Italian and German political ideals was perfectly represented by the difference between the heads of the two States. It is remarkable that in the course of ages the descendants of Tacitus's "free Germans" should have fallen to Byzantinism, while the descendants of those who burnt incense to the Roman emperors are as free from that particular form of political snobbery as any people in the world.

The King's interest in us during the first months of

our service in his army, and his public appreciation of our efforts, was altogether like himself, and I shall never cease to be grateful for it.

When that dark winter had passed away, the spring and summer of 1916 were brighter days in every sense. In the spring great victories of Italian organization and labour bettered the lot of the soldier, and prepared the ground scientifically for the successful renewal of the offensive in August.

The first victory, though negative, was immensely important. The cholera was conquered. "We were confronted," writes Colonel Filippo de Filippi,* "by a triple problem. (*a*) We had to localize the outbreak, and prevent its diffusion among the whole army; (*b*) we had to prevent the epidemic from spreading to Italy; (*c*) we had to provide for the isolation and cure of the patients. The problem was faced and radically solved by the combined efforts of the civil and military sanitary organization, whose united efforts won what was, perhaps, one of the greatest battles of the whole war." Measures of isolation and quarantine on a vast and well-organized plan produced the desired result, and

* "On some Special Problems of the Italian Medical War Services." Reprinted from the *Proceedings* of the Royal Society of Medicine, 1918, vol. xi.

the cholera was never heard of again.* "These measures were supplemented by a strict surveillance of drinking water, food, and hygienic conditions of the houses, barracks, etc. The supply of drinking water required special organization. Owing to the scarcity of springs on the tablelands to the north of Vicenza, by the Isonzo and on the Carso, it became necessary to organize the transport of water by lorries or by pumps and water-pipes, and by the building of reservoirs. The troops on the Asiago tableland alone required 100,000 gallons of water per day."

Henceforth, as I have seen again and again, on Podgora, Sabotino, Kuk, or on whatever hard-fought ridge or summit the Italian soldier planted his foot, in a few days a water-pipe and a *teleferica* (aerial railway) had followed him up to his new trenches on the height, and in a few weeks a good road for lorries and ambulances had reached the summit.

The *genio* (engineers) is a magnificent branch of the army. All over the world, in both hemispheres, there are Italian civil engineers of great and varied individual ability pushing their own fortunes. These men, answering their country's call when the war broke out,

* There had been 14,000 cases in the Italian army, of whom 46 per cent. died. It was worst in our Gorizia zone.

came back to form the military *genio* that has won so much foreign admiration. I knew several of these officers well, and it is difficult to find abler or finer men. From the spring of 1916 onwards hundreds of thousands of labourers, civil and military, were put at their disposition—the myriads who usually form the annual " emigration " of Italian labour abroad. For hard work the Italian navvy has no superior, and, perhaps, no equal. Hence the miracles of road-making, light-railway laying, *baracca*-building, bridging of rivers, boring out in the solid rock of trenches and underground galleries of immense size and complexity and in infinite number, and looping up of mountain tops with a system of aerial railways, that have distinguished the war both on the Isonzo and the high Alpine fronts.

Any one who saw the transformation scene wrought on the vast Italian war front in 1916, schemed, organized, and carried through entirely by Italian brains and hands, without any German bottle-holder, as in the case of the Austrian army, will certainly never believe the foolish and timid cry of a certain section of Italians that Italy could never stand by herself, but must needs depend on Germany. It was not for want of skill in native brains and hands that Italy just failed in 1917 to crush the Austrian armies, but simply from the want of

moral self-confidence, which these whimperers had themselves engendered. Italy may look back with pride on her own material achievement in the war zone, and say with regard to her own future in peace, "Not Germany, nor another. *Italia farà da se.*" If she can say that with her heart she has an immense future before her. Her birth-rate is higher, her common people more diligent than those of other nations. She is the land of many children. They play in a group round every farm door. There are no "small families" here. And they are a sturdy brood when they grow to manhood. All they need is native leadership; and after what I have seen of the *genio* in war time I have hopes that they can get it.

Of all the miracles of the *genio*, the roads naturally concerned us most. In January 1916 they were so bad that one day we went out from Quisca and ourselves mended a small stretch where our ambulances could not pass for the slough, by the simple process of putting a neighbouring wall bodily into the mud.* But in the spring the great work was taken in hand, and in an incredibly short space of time the Italian front had

* That day's work made me for the first time in my life understand the temptation and half forgive the vandalism of General Wade, who made the western part of the road from Newcastle to Carlisle passable by putting down into it the Roman Wall!

better roads, some remade and some new, than any front in the war—far better than the Austrian roads, as we found to our cost when we advanced on to the Bainsizza. The other armies of the world might have learnt much from the Italian road-makers. The work was rendered the easier by the presence of rock or gravel near the surface all through the hills and plains on the Italian war front. There were numbers of steam rollers employed, with the result that the surface as well as the engineering of these war roads was excellent. Before the war Italian roads, though well engineered, were far from smooth, as the steam roller was then rare.

It was a glorious country for those who, like us, were constantly moving along this magnificent network of new roads, over fruit-laden hills round Gorizia, or along high limestone ridges, cloven by the deep gorge of the blue rushing Isonzo, often with the wide prospect of plain and sea, and even the Istrian mountains beyond Trieste visible over the top of the distant Carso.

Our fellow-wayfarers on these wonderful roads, besides the slow-moving, patient infantry, and the flitting staff-cars, were Fiat lorry drivers and muleteers.

The Italian Fiat driver is skilful. In the exuberance of the early years of the war he sometimes trusted too much to his skill, and was given to causing surprises

round corners. The fact that the rule of the road—right or left—differs in different provinces and cities of Italy sometimes caused accidents, until it became impressed on the general imagination that in the war zone one kept to the right. But the skill, endurance, and courage of the Italian Fiat driver I have seen put to the proof again and again. As a mechanic, too, he is handy and quick to learn. The Italians take more naturally to the care and conduct of machines than ever they did to animals, and that is one reason why I believe Italy has a great future before her in the industrial age.

Of the wonders of the Turin Fiat works in war time, and their ninety camions turned out daily, all the world has heard. But only those who have seen the long strings of these lorries at their unending war task on the mountain sides can judge what the Fiat has meant to Italy. What the bullock was to the old Balkan wars, the Fiat and the mule have been to the Italian war. As a hill climber the Fiat is unequalled. Neither Talbot nor Buick—the latter, in our experience, the best hill climber, year in year out, among British and American ambulances—can equal the Fiat for the daily grind up steep ascents of many thousand feet. Up to all the incredible places whither the *genio* led their spiral roads, the Fiats brought the heaviest stores of war; and in

the critical moments of the summer battles of 1916, 1917, and 1918 they whisked the infantry by hundreds of thousands between the Trentino, Asiago, and Isonzo fronts as occasion required, so enabling the Italian command to avail itself to the full of its solitary geographical advantage over the enemy—the inner line of communications.

The carrying of the wounded by the Italian regular army ambulances was also done by Fiats, and nobly did the men and cars stand up to the work. But the Fiat, perfect as a mountain lorry, has a fault as an ambulance. Though it takes the hills splendidly, it vibrates too much for the comfort of the patients inside, and it is difficult to drive it slow—an important part of the art when bad cases are on board. I also think that our British ambulances had better bodies than the Italians; our system of stretcher racks makes it possible to load the bus in two or three minutes, while the elaborate Italian system of slings often takes a quarter of an hour or more loading. For work under fire, or whenever speed of evacuation is desirable, quick loading is very important. On the other hand, their big bodies took six stretchers to our four. But again the passage down the middle of our bodies enabled us to carry sitting cases with the stretchers. Anyhow it was a friendly rivalry.

I have said that the Italian drives and manages motors better than animals. But much praise is due to the patient Italian muleteers, whom I have so often met at night, on screened and silent roads and slippery mountain paths up Santo, Kuk, or Gabriele, going and coming along the shelled mule track on their comfortless, dangerous, wearisome mission, unthanked. No change has been more marked in Italy since I first knew it twenty years ago than the improved treatment of horses and mules. But the war has quickened the pace of that reform, for the need for "war economy" of beasts of draught or burden by means of proper grooming and feeding was from the first understood by the military authorities, and soon became a habit with the muleteers and drivers which they will doubtless carry back with them to their farms when the war is over.

The Italian cavalry officers' mounts, many of them bought in Ireland, were splendid animals, and their riders were often magnificent performers, known in European competitions. But, to go forward a little, I recall with pride the genuine pleasure of our Italian Allies at their first sight of the broad-bottomed, glossy-coated cart-horses of the British army, and its long-haired giant mules. A friend of mine, then a medical Major, used in 1918 to run downhill from his quarters

every day to admire the passage of a convoy of English carts, and embrace the horses' heads. It was he, by the way, who told me that he had one day, to his great amusement, seen a British Tommy, going home on leave, try to buy a cocked hat from a carabiniere on duty, to take home as a trophy. The sum he finally ran up to in his offers was fabulous, but he did not get the hat !

When I first knew this young Major Spelta three years before, he was a captain surgeon in the 4th Sanità at Quisca. It was at that Quisca mess that I first learnt what very good company Italian officers could be. How wonderfully the conversational ball was kept rolling, mostly about good-natured nothings, but never flagging, never dull ! Of the many good things said, I remember only one transferable from its human context. A soldier with a great and misshapen nose had come in with a message ; when he had gone, one of our surgeons said to his brethren, " Quel naso fa torto alla chirurgia Italiana " (" That nose is a disgrace to Italian surgery"). When, at due intervals, the conversation fell on politics, history, and war, it struck me that not less good sense and much more historical knowledge than is the portion of the educated Englishman, were common among Italian officers. On rarer occasions a loud-voiced controversy arose like a sudden tornado between two com-

batants, till both were finally stalking about the room and shouting together in a manner highly diverting but quite inaudible to the spectators. Then suddenly down they would sit ; the tornado had passed.

Oh, we were never dull in the Quarta Sezione Sanità at Quisca ! Geoffrey Young and I will always be grateful to that gay company for taking us strangers so completely to its heart. And least of all shall we forget its President, Major (now Colonel) Celio Nota, of Torino, whose humour, warmth of heart, good sense, and absolute devotion to the service of the wounded enabled him to fill to perfection the difficult post of medical chief at Quisca in that first terrible winter.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ISONZO FRONT, 1916.

Plava bottom—The Carso gas attack—Alpini, Bersaglieri, Arditi—Granatieri—The taking of Gorizia, Aug. 1916.

I MENTIONED above that when the war began in May 1915 the Austrians retired behind the Isonzo gorge, on the course of the river above Monte Sabotino. Such remained for two years the general position, the Italians occupying the western bank of the gorge, the ridge of Monte Planina and Monte Corada. But they had secured for themselves a precarious bridgehead across the Isonzo at Plava. By desperate gallantry and terrible losses in June 1915, with very little support from artillery, they had forced their way across the river, seized the village and railway station of Plava at the bottom of the gorge, and established themselves on the *quota*, or Hill of Plava, on the far side. They had extended this bridgehead to include the hamlet of Zagora a mile down stream, on the lower slopes of Monte Kuk.*

* See Map III. above and Map VII. below.

This position, untenable by all the rules of war, was held by the Italians from June 1915 till it became their base for the conquest of Kuk in May 1917. There was constant fighting, but neither side was able to dislodge the other, although the Austrians had their trenches only a few yards above the Italians on the almost precipitous sides of Kuk. In the hamlet of Zagora, a mere heap of stones, there was the semblance of part of one house left, occupied as a strong post in the Italian line. From its loopholes one saw the Austrian ruin ten yards away; there was only room for one set of barbed wire on No Man's Land, to serve the purpose of both sides. They lived like that for one year and eleven months.

A further weakness of the Italian bridgehead position lay in the fact that only one narrow road ran down from Verhovlje Pass to Plava bottom; and it was overlooked at the distance of a kilometre by the Austrian artillery and machine gunners on Monte Kuk, across the Isonzo. Yet everything that the mules could not bring down to Plava through the forest tracks had to come down the exposed road. This bad line of communications largely accounted for the failure to capture Kuk in August 1916, when Sabotino and Gorizia fell. Kuk and the Bainsizza beyond it fell in 1917 because

General Badoglio had then made a second and more sheltered road down to Plava bottom from a point farther north on Monte Corada.

In the spring of 1916 we took over a service previously done by the Italians, and sent an ambulance every night from Verhovlje to Plava bottom by what was then the only road. As it was an ambulance, the Carabinieri always allowed it to go first, at the head of the column of Fiat lorries that started down at a fixed hour after fall of dusk; similarly, it led the way back when the midnight column, having discharged its load of shells, timber, and barbed wire in the crowded space above the river bank at Plava, was marshalled to start back uphill. The road was too narrow for cars to meet and pass, and was as yet too much exposed for the *genio* to broaden it.

It was a romantic ride, especially on nights of any activity, with the star shells and rival searchlights revealing with their shifting rays masses of scarred mountain side; the gloomy gorge lay sheer below as we coasted down into its gulf, and the noising waters of many torrents mingled with the sounds of battle. In spite of the utmost efforts of two great armies, nature was still big enough to be lord and master of the Plava scene, by night or by day. In such eternal presences the long war itself

was but the play of boys for an hour upon the mountain side. Twenty thousand years hence, as twenty thousand years ago, Kuk and Planina, under whatever names or none, shall still look down on the rushing Isonzo whitening the bones of men.

I remember once, when a particularly heavy bombardment was being directed at the convoy waiting at Verhovlje in the gloaming for the order to start down into the gorge, the jolly young Fiat drivers amusing themselves by falling on the ground in paroxysms of affected terror every time a shell burst, and then catching hold of each other, and rolling over and over in sheer animal spirits. They were fine lads; the pace they drove round the curves of that dark and narrow road did credit at least to their nerve and skill.

At Plava bottom, when we first went down there in April 1916, the wounded were still being collected near the railway station, in the only house still in use that was in full view of the Austrians, being protected by the Red Cross. However, the officer in charge told me they had had sixty shells aimed at them that day, some successfully, so they were thinking of moving. They soon afterwards transferred the dressing-station across the Isonzo to the enemy side of the river, where they could find shelter by huddling close up under the foot of

Plava Hill. Thence the wounded were carried across the pontoon footbridge to our cars.

Everything that the Italians used in their positions beyond the river had to be carried by hand or by mule across that one pontoon bridge. The enemy had the range of it, and hit it again and again ; but at least it was not actually visible to them, as was every other point on the Isonzo stream until the Italians captured Kuk in May 1917. Till then, for two years, this was perforce the only bridge for feeding the Plava-Zagora position !

The Austrian machine gunner on Monte Kuk, who had so long tried in vain to render the road down to Plava impassable, was captured when the mountain fell, and had friendly conversations, laughingly comparing experiences with the Italian Fiat drivers, at whom he had taken so many shots across the river in the two years gone by.

Sabotino raised its head and shoulders bare above the hills around it. But from Quisca downwards wave after wave of fruit and vine-laden hills rippled down to the great plain. For two springs we saw these hills shimmering all round us with the white glory of the fruit blossom, and for three autumns we watched the vine leaves on the same hills turn red and gold, the

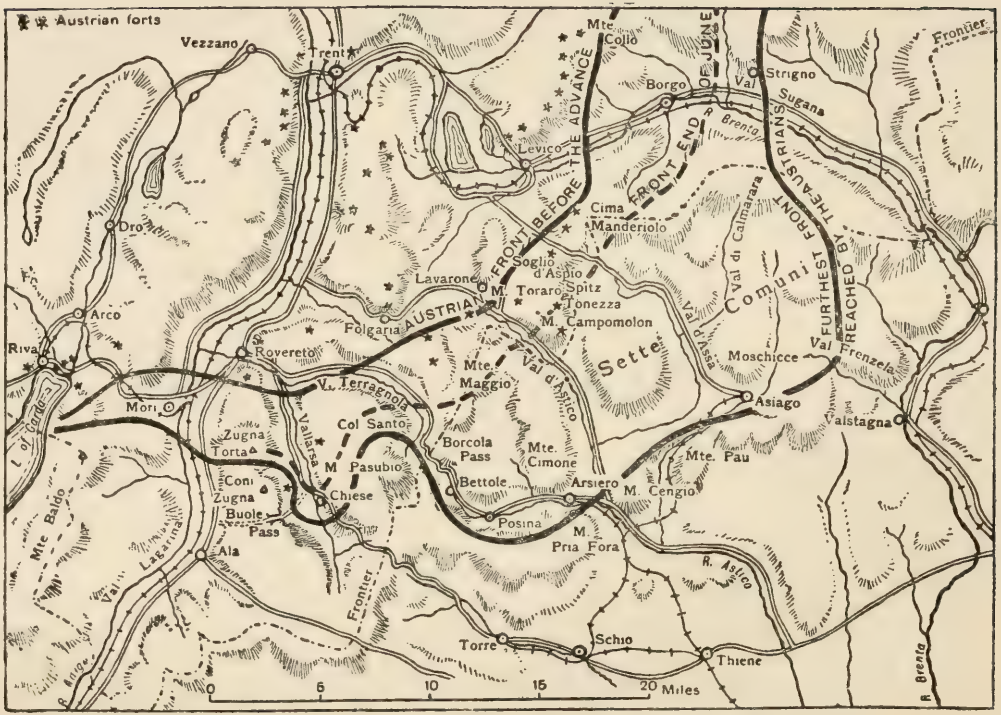
vineyards the while overgrown more thickly each year by a jungle of lovely weeds, which the returning husbandman has found, together with wrecked houses and new, broad, smooth roads for his produce.

The peasants had been removed from Quisca; but behind, from S. Martino downwards, they continued their ordinary life, occasionally suffering casualties, but getting entirely accustomed to the shells. I have heard a peasant woman, near Vipulzano, when the earth from the geyser thrown up by an Austrian 305 sprinkled her as she stood watching it, exclaim angrily, as she shook the mud off her dress, "O! la brutta cosa!" ("Nasty stuff!")

The peasants in the hamlets of the hills were mostly Slovene; in the plain and larger villages mostly Italian. The Slovenes were neither specially hostile nor specially favourable. There were certainly spies left in the hill villages in sight of the Austrian lines, who signalled to the enemy in many ingenious ways, as, for instance, a woman shaking the crumbs off her white tablecloth outside the door of her inn. The Italians treated the inhabitants, Italian and Slovene, well, and, if anything, erred in want of strictness and in letting them live on, as they wished to do, in places where the civil population would have been cleared out by other armies.

While the Italians were bending all their thoughts and energies to scientific preparation for a renewed offensive against Gorizia and Trieste, the enemy in May 1916 gave them a nasty surprise where they least expected anything. The line of high Alps, three hundred miles long, which they thought they had safely closed behind the back of their Isonzo operations, was forced at an ill-guarded point. The Austrian advance on to the Asiago plateau and down the Astico valley gave Italy some bad weeks, for it bade fair to compel an evacuation of Friuli and Venetia by the great army of the Isonzo, whose rear was now threatened. But Cadorna used to the full his one great advantage of the inner line of communications, slinging troops across from the Isonzo to the Trentino in the Fiat lorries. On May 22nd our friends of the 4th Sanità section went off to the Trentino at twelve hours' notice.

The greatest danger at the end of May was in the Astico valley, where the enemy had taken the rock summits of Pria Fora and Cimone, and were pouring through the town of Arsiero down the valley itself, actually on the level of the great plain. The Italians, who had been driven back far behind their prepared lines, had then no trenches in that region nor fastnesses hollowed out in the rocks, but met the invader hand to



MAP IV.—Austrian Offensive in the Trentino, May–June 1916.

hand, and thrust him back by desperate fighting over the precipices of Pria Fora. In the valley below, one of the farthest points reached by the enemy was Fogazzaro's country villa, built in a good modern style amid beautiful woods and meadows below Arsiero. It is now a mass of ruins in a world of war.* These actions saved Italy in the early days of June 1916.

In the latter half of June the recovery of further ground on the Asiago plateau, coinciding with the announcement of the amazing Russian victories marked by the capture or desertion of two or three hundred thousand Austrians, removed the last element of danger in the Trentino. It was a happy period for all Italians. Intense relief from national peril, joy that they had saved themselves by their own exertions and by political unity and calmness at the bad moment, were combined with legitimate pride that the drawing off of the Austrian artillery and forces to the Trentino had rendered the Russian victories possible. At the same time the great British offensive on the Somme gave the Italians the sense that the advantage was passing to the side of the Allies, and a new-born confidence in the might of Britain as something more than a naval power.

* I know the region well, because during 1918 some of our cars were stationed in the town of Arsiero, as described in Chap. VIII. below.

Under these happy auspices the men and guns began to pour back to the Isonzo front. The preparations for the great attack on Gorizia were resumed. In July, for the first time they screened our Quisca road for coming events.

But first the Austrians made another nearly successful attempt to throw out the plans for the offensive. The Italians were already established on the edge of the Carso tableland; but to take and hold Gorizia, still more to advance on Trieste, they would have to push along the Carso much farther. If the enemy could now prevent them by a surprise attack, thrusting them off the edge of the Carso down into the plain of Aquileia, Cadorna's whole plan would be ruined in advance.

This scheme the Austrians almost carried to success by the unexpected use of poison gas on a large scale. Hitherto that weapon had played no part on the Italian front, where the story of the Ypres gas attack was merely as a tale that is told. The Italians had served out masks, but they fitted too close; the troops complained of suffocation, and either neglected to carry them or threw them away in the hour of need. Hence the surprise by gas on June 29, 1916, caused a frightful massacre in the Italian trenches, and drove whole regiments, staggering and dying as they went, off the edge of the Carso.

If the Austrian infantry had all come on as they should, the disaster would have been irreparable. But some of them remained inactive, and the situation was saved by Colonel Gandolfi, who gathered round him half a dozen men in gas masks, and made shift to hold a trench until reinforcements came up. For this splendid service he was awarded the gold medal *al valore*. Till then the gold medal had been reserved for those who had been killed, but it has since then gradually assumed a position more or less analogous to that of our V.C.*

The Third British Red Cross Unit, commanded by Mr. F. Alexander, was then serving the Italians on the Carso; but the victims of the gas attack were so numerous that our Unit was called on to send aid thither outside its ordinary sphere. I spent the night of June 29th–30th in the dressing-station of Sagrado at the foot of the Carso, while the cars of our two Units were coming and going, transferring load after load of poisoned wretches to the field hospitals in the plain. The courtyard and large garden beyond it were filled with tortured men, falling down under our eyes and dying in agony by hundreds together. The Italians, to whom this form

* Below the gold are the silver and bronze medals *al valore*, and below them again the *croce al merito di guerra* (croix de guerre) instituted in 1918.

of warfare was new and shocking, as it had been to our men at Ypres in April 1915, were furious at the perpetrators, and everywhere we heard them exclaiming against the " barbarism and treachery " of the Austrians. But I noticed with pleasure that even in that terrible scene, when, if ever, vindictive passion would be let loose, the wounded prisoners were medicated and placed on our ambulances with the same tender care as on every other occasion, and in due rotation with the Italian victims of the gas.

Several thousand Italians died, and several thousand recovered. But the lesson was not lost. After that every soldier carried an effective gas mask of Italian make in a tin box. Finally, after the arrival of the British army, our allies in 1918 adopted the *maschera inglese*, as they called it, such as our own troops wear.

The same spring and summer of 1916 saw the gradual adoption of the shrapnel helmet. The first helmets—I remember the curiosity with which they were handed round at Quisca—were French, with " R.F." stamped on them. These became the model for the helmets which the Italians then manufactured for their whole army. The appearance of the ordinary infantry regiments was greatly improved by the change, for the squashy Italian *beretto* is a poor affair. The helmet gave them the

appearance of Roman soldiers. Only the Bersaglieri and Alpini stood to lose in distinction by the exchange of their own traditional headgear. The Bersaglieri generally contented themselves with attaching a feather to their helmets in memory of the magnificent plumage that was theirs by ancient right. The Alpini tended to eschew the helmet, and as often as possible still appeared in their handsome felt hats, shaped like that in which Louis XI. kept his leaden images.

The Bersaglieri were founded by General La Marmora in the forties of the last century, and soon became the crack regiment of the little Piedmontese army that played so great a part in the making of Italy. They won their reputation in the Crimea in 1855 by the side of their English and French allies, and in the wars that freed their country from Austrian and Papalist in 1848–49, 1859–60, 1866, and 1870. Their nodding plumes and springing step, and the blare of trumpets behind which they ran into the battle, became the symbol of the Italian army to all Europe.

They still take pride in their trumpets. In one Bersagliere regiment eighty privates were trained during the war as a band of trumpeters, without the men foregoing their other military duties. I shall never forget standing on a windy mountain top over the Isonzo

gorge, to hear at a few yards' distance their brazen clangour musically salute the Alps at dawn, while Colonel Gotti apologized for a mere eighty when he hoped soon to have a hundred.

But the famous Bersagliere-trot has been discarded as a method of marching, partly on medical grounds. We see its substitute in the numerous battalions of " Bersagliere ciclisti " which have played so important a part in the war. Hurrying up on their " push-bikes," these gallant troops are flung in wherever the fight is hottest and the call for quick reinforcement greatest. How often I have seen them coming at the hour of need ! Many of these cyclist battalions have been killed off and re-formed again and again.

The first time that I came across the Bersaglieri intimately was in May 1916, when our Unit played a football match against the 9th Bersaglieri ciclisti. They had a good team, and we won none too easily. They played what we call a very " clean " game, and it was a most friendly and pleasant occasion. After the match we were entertained by the officers of the battalion. The Major might have been forty, but the rest, including the captains, were young fellows of twenty or thereabouts. The Major told me that he was the fifth commandant of the battalion since the war began a year

before, and the only one of the original officers who had not been killed or wounded. They were going up to the trenches again on the Carso in a few days, and there would soon be a sixth commandant. He was quite cheerful and gay, but confided to me that it was his task to turn these young men coming straight from home and college into ready-made Bersaglieri. It lay with him to give them the traditions and feelings of Bersaglieri, which, he said, had generally to be acquired by years of life in the corps. But these youngsters had to get it in a few months from him alone. After dinner they sat round and sang the special Bersagliere songs in fine loud chorus, while the Major strummed for them on a guitar. It was a "family" party. I have seldom liked any company of strangers better, or been more touched by the occasion. That was as long ago as May 1916, when the most prolonged and bitter fighting on the Isonzo front was still to come. How many of them are left now?

As to the rank and file of the Bersaglieri, they contained many of the noblest Italian types. I select the word carefully, for there is a strain of refinement or "nobility" of manner found in the best of the Italian common people which is not usual north of the Alps, though sterling qualities may be more universal. I have seen

faces among the privates of the Bersaglieri as strong and yet refined as you would see in any society in the world. Their wounded never complained, and I remember how, after a bloody repulse in which certainly "some one had blundered," the returning Bersaglieri merely said to us "è andato male" with quiet dignity, when every one else was loud-mouthed in objurgation. The discipline of the Bersaglieri is the best in the Italian army.

Discipline is not the special point of the Arditi. Their merit is fierce and reckless courage, and a gaiety of boyish spirits that is infectious to the rest of the army, and has done much to keep up its fluctuating *moral* in these last two years of the war, when principally the Arditi have been in evidence. They are "Sturm Truppen," men "full of daring," as their name implies, selected by voluntary enlistment from the more active spirits in the ordinary regiments. They are specially trained, kept in the rear outside the life of the trenches till the day of battle, and then hurried up in the Fiat lorries and sent in to carry the enemy positions. This system was gradually developed in the course of the present war, and reached its full proportions only in the last year, when the Arditi, in their loose, open-necked jackets, with the crest of the dagger and palms on the sleeve, became a sight familiar to all. Some

battalions of them are given a special physical and athletic training, and to see the *fiamme nere*, as these are called on account of their black nightcaps, march past singing, stripped to the waist, is to see the physical side of man at its best. Skill in flame-throwing, bomb-throwing, and the dagger at close quarters are their favourite arts ; holding the trenches by rifle fire after their capture is left to the ordinary regiments of infantry.

Indeed, the Ardito lives in an atmosphere of bombs and flame. To get into the favoured corps from a line regiment, the aspirant has to satisfy the authorities in a pass examination which consists of running through a machine-gun barrage, at which a certain percentage of examinees are actually wounded. At reviews, when the Arditi oblige with an exhibition of their flame-throwing and bombing tactics, it is frequent for the " joyous and gentle passage of arms " to end in a few casualties. The Arditi have the reputation of throwing bombs at each other or at passers-by out of sheer high spirits. They are the ringleaders of the army in the constant bickering with the Carabinieri, who carry out so faithfully and, as I believe, justly the disagreeable duties of Military Police. They call the Carabinieri " aeroplanes," on account of their wide-winged hats. An army order was issued forbidding any one to call a

Carabiniere an " aeroplane, " *in senso di disordine* (" in a disorderly sense "). A Carabiniere was once found lying bound on a mountain road I knew, with a label attached to him, *Aeroplano nemico abattuto dagli arditi* (" enemy aeroplane brought down by the Arditi "). In this standing quarrel my sympathies are all with the Carabinieri. But the reckless high spirits of the Arditi were a wholesome tonic to the *moral* of the army in the latter days.

The Alpini, in origin and character, are neither so modern and impressionist as the Arditi, nor so dignified and early Victorian as the Bersaglieri. They date from the period immediately following the *Risorgimento*, when the new kingdom of Italy had acquired a mountain frontier marching with Austria. Raised mostly among the Alpine populations and a few from the Abruzzi, they were a splendid body of men when the war broke out. The taking of Monte Nero in June 1915 was as fine a feat of arms and mountaineering combined as stands on record in history. I remember, when we were carrying some Alpini who had been wounded near Tolmino in the September of that year, thinking that I had never seen finer men. But on the Alpini, as on the Bersaglieri, the heavy, long-drawn weight of the war fell and rested ; the original Alpini were annihilated. Their successors

were, indeed, not unworthy; but they were not all recruited from the mountain districts, and they disclaimed, with a true modesty that did them no injury in our eyes, to be the equals of those who had fallen in the first two years of the war.

Of this second generation, so to speak, of Alpini we saw much in 1918, when some of our cars were working for them at the foot of the *teleferiche*, below the precipices of Pasubio. It struck me that the officers were more in touch with the thoughts, needs, and daily lives of the men than in the line regiments. Officers and men locked up together for months in the snow, as much away from the world as sailors on a voyage, naturally get to understand each other's needs. Willingness and smartness prevailed among all ranks.

Indeed, in many respects it is a special service, this Alpine warfare, distinct like that of the navy or the air. It requires men born and bred in the mountains, and then trained to mountain warfare. The British and French troops fought splendidly in the high-raised Asiago plateau and its hills of pine; but, except the French Alpins, they could not have been put on Pasubio or any similar rock citadel for six months of snow-bound life, with *teleferiche* for their only communications. They would have been only a little less out of their

element than if they had been at sea. It was the Alpini who guarded the hundreds of miles of higher Alps between one valley and the next, quartered in the snow-bound *arêtes* and gullies for three livelong winters of actual warfare, under conditions that would have killed other troops less skilled in snowcraft, less hardy and less patient by inherited instinct to outface all that the high hills can do to drive man down from their summits.

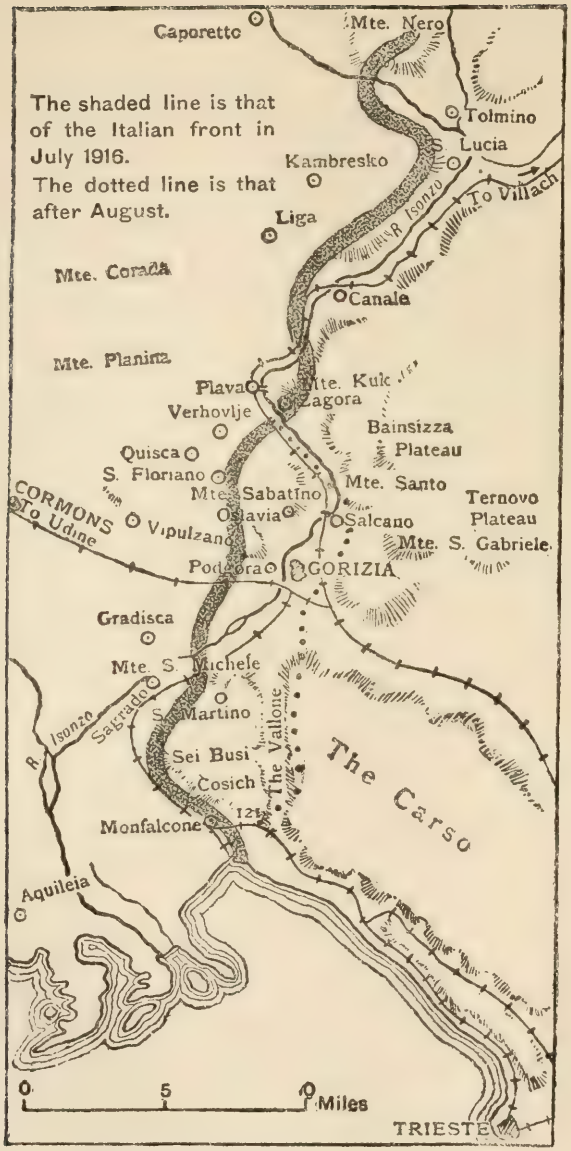
Besides Bersaglieri, Alpini, and Arditi, mention should be made of yet another *corps d'élite*, the Granatieri, selected for their height. We came across them in the winter of 1915, in the fighting on Sabotino and Oslavia, where they lost very heavily. Transferred subsequently to the Duke of Aosta's Third Army, they went again and again into the desperate fighting on Carso and Hermada, and after the retreat took a leading part in the successful defence of the Lower Piave. Their reputation stands very high, and has been dearly bought.

On the Isonzo front in the late summer of 1916 the preparations were ripe at length for the great offensive against Gorizia. The object of the enlarged 6th Army Corps, under General Capello, was to carry the bulwarks of the city on the Italian side of the Isonzo —Sabotino, Oslavia, and Podgora hills—and then, after

entering the city, to carry the heights beyond the river —San Gabriele and Monte Santo. If a corresponding advance was made on the north side of the Carso by the Third Army, under the Duke of Aosta, Gorizia could be safely occupied, and a starting-off place secured for the ultimate turning of the farther part of the Carso that covered Trieste. The objectives were, in fact, the same as those of the long, unhappy offensive of the previous winter, but the means and methods were very different. The spirit of Badoglio, Capello's chief of staff, had now first made itself felt in the Italian war. The work of the *genio* for six months past had supplied the network of roads, the gun emplacements, and warlike provision of every kind in the zone of Gorizia. But, unfortunately, General Capello's command did not yet include the Plava bottom and the approaches to Monte Kuk, as it did in the following year.

The change since the last winter was audible in the first minutes of the battle, when, at six o'clock on August 6, 1916, the quiet summer Sunday morning was startled and deafened by a very different kind of bombardment from any before heard on the Italian front. Early the same afternoon all Monte Sabotino was in Italian hands. The terrific barrage on the *trincerone* * kept the Austrians

* See page 47 above.



MAP V.—The Offensive of August 1916.

paralyzed in their rock chambers, whence they should have issued to hold the great trench against the Italian assault. The assailants, coming up the steepest way from the bottom of the valley on the south-west, crossed the broken defences without meeting resistance, and occupied the two entrances to the great dug-out while the inmates were still inside. Sabotino and its defenders, after defying Italy for fifteen months, had been captured almost without loss a few hours after the bombardment began. Here was scientific war at last. It was Badoglio's first great triumph.

Prior to the year 1918 the Italian campaign was distinguished from the campaign in Flanders by the large numbers of prisoners taken on both sides. One reason was the readiness to surrender of many of the subject populations of Austria-Hungary ; but another was the character of the ground. The hard limestone of the Sabotino and Kuk district enabled both sides, by blasting operations and machine drills, to bore out chambers in which thousands of men could be safely housed with a sense, highly attractive to the inmates, of complete security so long as they refrained from coming out. In the muddy soil of Flanders such large, safe dug-outs could not easily be constructed. But when an important system of dug-outs was captured on the Italian

front, it disgorged prisoners by thousands at a time. Centuries hence, while the blue rushing Isonzo, noising far below, still sings its ancient song, the hill-wandering shepherd will marvel to discover subterranean labyrinths and palatial caverns hollowed out by the giants of old beneath the deserts of his thin mountain pastures, and will weave strange legends of their first purpose, none stranger, surely, than the truth.

On the evening of August 6th and the following days the prisoners began to pour down the roads in columns of a thousand at a time, gladdening the hearts of the up-coming Italian regiments. They were happy meetings, full of kindly human nature, and encouraging to the hopes of future democratic peace. The prisoners were frankly glad that their warfare was accomplished, and the Italians, while rejoicing to see these signs of victory, sympathized with the evident relief of their late enemies at being individually out of the war. One touch of nature quickly makes the Italian peasant-soldier akin with all the world. The Italians were now mostly in shrapnel helmets, but their captives were still in slouchy, dishevelled forage caps. Only in the next year's battles did the heavy Boche helmet gradually make its appearance in the Austrian ranks.

Though high, bare Sabotino had been won so

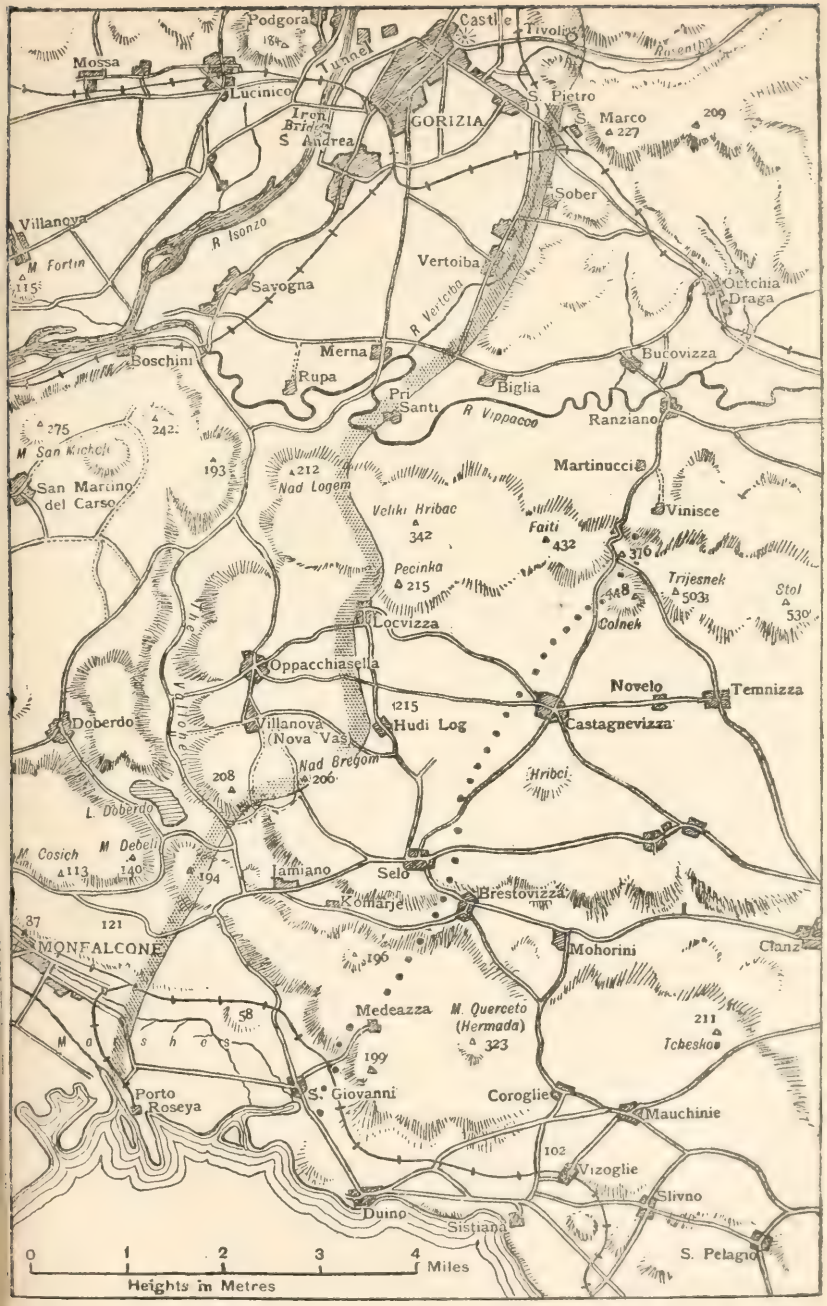
quickly and at so cheap a price, there were three days' fierce fighting for the lower, wooded heights of Oslavia and Podgora. Wooded, indeed, they no longer were, for twelve months of seldom-intermitted local warfare, in which systems of trenches had changed hands and ground been shifted again and again, had reduced both Oslavia and Podgora ridges to a rubbish heap worthy of the most chosen spots on the Western front. Unwearied nature, who waits for no public funds to commence her work of reconstruction, has already in two years covered up the ravages with coarse grass ; but houses, vineyards, and terraces are as though they had never been, lying mixed together under the grass with the bones of heroes. Man looks on helpless at the ruin he has made, and it may well be long ere the peasant lives there again and tills new fields.

The fight was specially fierce for Podgora ridge top, scientifically armed, trenched, and caverned. It was turned at both ends, and surrounded for some considerable time before it surrendered. Then the Italians plunged across the Isonzo to occupy the town. The foremost man was Sub-lieutenant Aurelio Baruzzi, aged nineteen ; his preliminary feat was, with three followers, to capture several hundred Austrians crowded in the famous railway tunnel between Podgora height and river,

where he held them captive for a long time till reinforcements came.* He then led a small party across the bridge, entered Gorizia, and raised the Italian flag that he always carried in his pocket on the roof of the passenger station, as a signal to his compatriots to follow the daring patrol across the river. He was given the then very rare distinction of the gold medal for his day's work, and found himself suddenly famous. But he was still the same simple and modest sub-lieutenant when, some months later on, two of our drivers met him and made friends with him on the Liga heights.

Not many yards to the north of Baruzzi's railway tunnel, at the southern entrance of Podgora factory town, the industrial suburb of Gorizia on the western bank of the Isonzo, stands a high garden wall displaying to the road a mural monument. It commemorates an Austrian Count who, in 1809, led fifty men out of Gorizia across the river, and surprised and held a trench fort on the summit of Podgora ridge. For more than a year, during the first occupation of Gorizia by the Italians, I used to pass the monument on the average once a day, the Italian guns barking over its head from the neighbouring

* One end of the tunnel had been solidly blocked up by the Austrians, who were, therefore, trapped in it. The Italians opened the tunnel again so as to use the road through Podgora village.



MAP VI.—The Capture of Gorizia; Carso Positions after August 1916.

(The shaded line represents the positions at end of August 1916. The dotted line shows the approximate furthest point reached on the Carso in 1917.)

garden. It seemed at the time a satirical comment on a hundred years of modern progress in a circle. But now we have good reason to hope that the opening of the twenty-first century, when it comes, may see Latin and Teuton better engaged than in crossing and re-crossing the Isonzo stream, and killing each other on Podgora height.

Just the other side of the railway tunnel, to the south, below the broken railway viaduct, an iron bridge spanned the Isonzo.* The bridge, shot through again and again, was practically impassable for any save foot-passengers till the *genio* had repaired it. However, on the night of August 9th–10th, Geoffrey Young took four of our cars across in a jam with the artillery and horse-carts, and fetched out wounded from the town. They were certainly the first ambulances, and, I believe, the first automobiles, to cross the river and enter Gorizia. The holes were the principal feature of the bridge at the time, but Young guided the cars one after another, inch by painful inch, over these perilous chasms all night. At dawn the Austrian shooting had rendered the bridge utterly impassable, and nothing more was allowed across till next nightfall. Meanwhile the *genio* laboured all day repairing the bridge under a heavy fire.

* See Map VI.

That day (August 10th) I crossed by a footbridge higher up the river into Salcano village north of Gorizia, at the foot of San Gabriele, where the Italians were already fighting hard for the lower slopes of that now famous mountain that completely dominates Gorizia. Near the footbridge I found General Venturi, commanding the northern division that we were supposed to serve from Quisca, and agreed with him that the British cars should cross the river farther south by the only possible way, the iron bridge used by Young the night before, that they should come up north again through Gorizia into Salcano, and carry off his wounded thence. I then made my way round to the iron bridge and talked to the *genio* officers working on it as to the likelihood of its being reopened for traffic that night in time for the fulfilment of this new plan.

As I was turning back from the end of the bridge, a figure in an English correspondent's khaki uniform jumped on to the road beside me. As I was wondering who my fellow-countryman would be, for clearly he was not my friend Mr. M'Clure, I suddenly saw behind him the thin, aquiline form of Mr. Wickham Steed, the evil genius of the House of Hapsburg, and the avenging angel of the races oppressed by the Dual Monarchy. He had come to the right place at an historic hour.

Then it dawned upon me by inference that his companion must be Lord Northcliffe. Their arrival at Gorizia at the moment of its fall was of ultimate importance to the long-deferred unity of front, and to the understanding of Italian needs and anti-Austrian opportunity by the generals, statesmen, and peoples of the Entente.

That night, according to the arrangement with General Venturi, the British cars were brought round from Quisca and Vipulzano by the southern route over the iron bridge, now repaired, through Gorizia streets lit by burning houses, and out along the northern road into Salcano village, whence we carried back wounded by the same route. Next day (August 11th) British and Italian ambulances both worked over this ground by daytime. The dressing-station of the 45th Section was moved twice that day, each time farther back towards Gorizia along the Salcano road, as the houses in which it had been established were one by one broken up by shells. The Italian orderlies and stretcher-bearers worked well in trying conditions, under our friend, the energetic medical Major Bocchia, who was always to the front, and ended by being captured beyond Monfalcone in the following May.

During this and the following days roads, bridges,

and houses on the east side of Podgora ridge were kept under a heavy Austrian bombardment, with little reply. For a time the tables were turned in the matter of artillery. The battle had begun on August 6th with an Italian predominance against Sabotino and Podgora; but now the Italian guns were in process of being moved up, and till they got into their new positions it was a bad time for the troops round Gorizia and Salcano and at the foot of San Gabriele, that terrible mountain that was never completely taken till it fell unfought for in November 1918. The Italian infantry who had crossed the river also suffered from shortage of rifle ammunition, for even the footbridges were few, and were constantly broken by the Austrian shell fire.

And so by August 15th the Italian advance reached its limit for the year.* Half the objectives of General Capello's army corps had been attained, and the Third Army had correspondingly pushed forward on the Carso, capturing San Michele and the heights on both sides the Vallone, and thereby making Gorizia safe to the south. But nothing could have enabled the Gorizia army corps to complete its work by the capture of San Gabriele and Monte Santo at the first rush, except a simultaneous attack on Monte Kuk from the Plava

* See Map V. above, dotted line, and Map VI., shaded line.

bottom. This attack, however, was only delivered after the Gorizia army corps had been fought to a standstill, and after the Austrians had had time to bring their reserves back from the San Gabriele region successfully to defend Monte Kuk.

General Capello and his chief of staff had won their laurels as the conquerors of Gorizia, and if the Plava attack had been mistimed it was not their fault, for it was not in their zone that year. The Plava sector ought always to have been under the same command as the Gorizia zone, because Kuk, Monte Santo, and San Gabriele were all one geographical and military system. This mistake was fully realized and remedied in 1917.

The personality of General Capello was remarkable. A short, stout figure, with a face suggesting at first sight *bonhomie* and nothing more, there was, as one soon found, a fire of zeal and energy underneath. Shortly before the taking of Gorizia he had been driving through a village street where a mad soldier was flourishing about with a bayonet. The bystanders were afraid to tackle him. The General leapt from his touring car, and himself disarmed the madman.

CHAPTER V.

Villa Trento Field Hospital—Gorizia during the occupation—
The Carso.

DURING the first two years and more of our work in Italy—until, in fact, the Retreat brought that side of our activities to an end—the field hospital at Villa Trento,* working for the 6th Italian Army Corps, formed a part of our Unit. The Director of the hospital was Dr. Brock, well known for twenty years past in Rome. His courtesy, tact, and long-acquired sympathy with things Italian, and the skill in the language acquired by many of our nurses, enabled him to give to our hospital an Anglo-Italian character that made the soldiers who came there glad to be in the hands of foreigners who understood and attended so well to their wants and feelings. This, to my thinking, was a considerable feat.

The hospital leant much on Scotland, for, besides Dr. Brock, we also had the honour to have with us

* See Map II.

Sir Alexander Ogston, whose fame and whose quiet, benevolent courtesy to all persons great or small added to the prestige and popularity of Villa Trento. Dr. W. E. Thompson, of Canada and Scotland, ably represented the younger generation of surgery.

Villa Trento grew to be a field hospital of 180 beds, with a nursing staff of a score of British Sisters and V.A.D.'s, under the matron, Sister Power. But this organization was only gradually built up, for when we first came out, in August 1915, the Italian authorities still had a rule against women nurses at the front. At the very moment of our arrival this rule was set aside, and we were encouraged to send for women nurses. In this aspect of hospital work the country of Florence Nightingale has two generations start of Italy, and nothing was more interesting than to see the employment of women nurses begin and take root in the Italian field hospitals around us. Those of them whom we saw—like the Signorina Italia Garibaldi, in whom the heroic traits of the family were not wanting—were capable and devoted to a degree, struggling each to do the work of ten women, for naturally in the infancy of the movement the supply of trained or even half-trained nurses was small.

This important development took place under the

fostering care of the Duchess of Aosta, the head of the Italian nurses. She was a frequent visitor at Villa Trento, a good friend to us English, and, as we are proud to remember, an admirer of our hospital. It has been a great good fortune for this difficult early period of female nursing in Italy, and for the sick and wounded during the war, that the Duchess of Aosta was a born leader. She established the position of female nurses at the front against all old-fashioned critics. Not only does she possess the distinctively " royal " qualities in an attractive form, but she is a lady of great wisdom in management and of tireless energy and devotion. In difficult times, both in the Retreat and very notably during the equally rapid and longer advance in November 1918, when the excellent machinery of the Italian field hospitals was thrown out of gear by the pace, the Duchess was to the fore where things were worst, carrying with her a group of her best nurses to plant down where they were most shockingly needed, and herself going for an incredible number of hours without food or rest.

On one occasion, in the summer of 1917, we took in at Villa Trento an overflow of fifty patients from the British army hospital then established for General Hamilton's newly-arrived batteries. I remember being

struck by the difference on entering our " Garibaldi Ward " on the first day that it contained British ; every one on that day was reading something, whether book or newspaper. The Italian soldier, on the other hand, generally prefers to lie still, quietly happy in a comfortable bed and the sense of companionship around. On the days for evacuating groups of patients there were heartrending scenes ; some who had been with us awhile were desolated at having to depart, and in the literal sense of the words, " lifted up their voices and wept." Often when they got to the base hospital and finally to their own home, simple peasants once more, but too often now lacking an arm or a leg, they would write or cause to be written letters, or whole series of letters, of gratitude and affection to the " Signorine Inglesi " who had tended them so devotedly at Villa Trento.

Our Allies appreciated the close individual attention in nursing, and the atmosphere of " home " which we did our best to create for our patients in the fine old villa and shady grounds assigned to us. Our Italian medical chiefs, General Bonomo, Inspector-General of Hospitals at the front ; General Angelantonio, Medical Director of the Second Army ; and Colonels Morino and Santucci, Medical Directors of our Army Corps, and subsequently of the Second and Third Armies

respectively, were deeply interested in our hospital and most generous in their praise of it.

Of Colonel Morino I have spoken already. Of Colonel (now General) Santucci it is difficult for me to speak, I owe him so much gratitude, and feel for him so much affection. Second to none in the Italian army as an organizer of their gigantic and carefully-systematized medical service, he was from his heart outwards the friend of England, with unshakable faith in the issue of the war so long as England and Italy held together. Always thinking of our work and interests, whether as regards the ambulances or the hospital, he was to me the very embodiment of the spirit of the *entente* between the two countries, and of the finest and most solid Italian enthusiasm for the ideal side of the common cause. In the ever-recurring seasons of disappointed hopes and unexpected disasters, when Rumania fell, and whenever Russia failed, nothing did me more good than either to see General Santucci draw himself up with his good eyes kindling, and wave his hand saying, "*Ho grande fiducia*," or else to see Sir Alexander Ogston smile as he smoked his pipe. They were two different ways of expressing the same idea. But did either of those optimists dream of anything like this wonderful ending?

Besides our nurses at Villa Trento, there were two groups of ladies who played a remarkable part on the Italian front in 1916–17—the Radiographic Unit of Countess Helena Gleichen and Mrs. Nina Hollings, and Mrs. Watkins and her " canteen " ladies. There was no more characteristic sight on the roads than the radiographic cars being driven by Mrs. Hollings and Countess Gleichen from hospital to hospital at the front.* And England was equally well represented by the other ladies who served that Unit during the great Italian offensives of 1917, whether in their shell-battered house in Gorizia or in the safer but more romantic railway tunnel in Plava gorge.

The Radiographic Unit did a great deal of valuable work where it was most needed. But Mrs. Watkins's contribution to the cause was of no less practical service. Canteens for the wounded passing through had been set up in the principal railway stations throughout the Peninsula by local Italian committees. But since there could be no local committee to set up a canteen at the railheads on the Isonzo front, Cervignano, and

* We had a fixed radiographic plant at Villa Trento, but the ladies' 4th or Radiographic B.R.C. Unit was mobile, and went the round of the Italian field hospitals, which, especially near the front, seldom had a plant of their own. In other zones of the war the Italian Red Cross had similar mobile radiographic cars working.

San Giovanni Manzano,* Mrs. Watkins and a band of English ladies undertook the work there. But Mrs. Watkins's influence went further than her canteen work. It was she who suggested and who helped General Capello to set up the first of the Case del Soldato, or recreation huts for soldiers, which afterwards became so essential a part of the life of the forces in the field. The huts were from the first a work of the Italian army ; but Mrs. Watkins's part in the originating of the movement should stand on record.

Gorizia was a health and pleasure resort of the Austrian military and bureaucratic classes, lying in a mild climate,† on a little plain through which the blue Isonzo rushes out from the iron gateway of Sabotino and San Gabriele. Overlooked by those twin gaunt giants Gorizia is even more closely dominated by the lower more comfortable heights of Podgora and San Marco. The Italians now held Sabotino and Podgora ; but the Austrians were firm on San Gabriele and San Marco, their positions on the latter being in some places not a

* See Map II.

† Hence there are many more villas and places of residence round Gorizia than round Trieste, which, as I discovered in the happier winter of 1918, is blown over perpetually by the cold Bora, and boasts as uninviting a winter climate as Edinburgh.

kilometre from the heart of the town, which was only to some very slight extent protected by the ancient castle on its hilltop.* Such, from August 1916 to September 1917, remained the position. When, in 1917, British officers began to visit or serve on the Italian front more frequently than before, I had often the pleasure of taking one or another of them up the Oslavia road to show them the view. When they saw it they were always amazed at the exposed position which the Italians in Gorizia were making good, with enemy heights rising straight up from the feet of their outposts, and a rapid river behind perpetually beating on their shelled pontoons.

In these circumstances the year of occupation was one long bombardment and a series of fierce infantry struggles for the heights beyond the town. San Marco's woods, which had waved green welcome when we entered Gorizia in August 1916, disappeared as Podgora woods had disappeared before them, and soon the crests of San Marco shone in the distant view, bare and red as Podgora ridge itself. If on any one occasion in the year's fighting the Austrians on San Marco had been able to advance a kilometre, they would have retaken the town and put the Italians into the river. The fighting for Santa Caterina, the offshoot of San Gabriele,

* See Map VI.

above Salcano village, was scarcely less frequent and bitter, and equally barren of result.

Until the Russian defection in the summer of 1917 gradually turned the tables, the Italians in Gorizia had the preponderance of artillery. They brought their guns up not only to Podgora and Sabotino, but over the river into the town itself. Gorizia and its pleasant villa suburbs were honeycombed with batteries that barked and roared night after night. The guns were packed so closely that they were often near enough to the hospitals and dressing-stations to offer some excuse for the destruction by enemy bombardment of one after another of the sanctuaries protected by the Red Cross sign. On those occasions, as we witnessed, the Italian medical officers by their example inspired their men with a calmness which enabled the evacuation to take place in perfect order. The maintenance of regular field hospitals in Gorizia itself, only two kilometres from the enemy's lines, was a feature in the Italian medical policy differing, I believe, from the practice in some other armies. It enabled first-class surgical operations to be carried out at the front at the price for the wounded of an appreciable amount more of danger and disturbance from the bombardment. There was clear loss and clear gain.

Since, however, no corner of the city and suburbs was safe, it was desirable to move across the river to safety, at the earliest possible moment, all those patients whom the doctors did not decide to keep in the hospitals. We therefore took up quarters for our ambulances in Gorizia, so as to be at the beck and call of the dressing-stations by night and day. Our main establishment was a large house on the northern outskirts of the town (No. 16 via Ponte Isonzo), looking up a pleasant grove and garden to San Gabriele, but screened from view of the Austrians there by some fine old chestnut trees, beneath which we parked our cars. Here we spent a busy and romantic year.

One night early in December 1916 a shell broke in the wall of the room where our night drivers slept. Three of the four were out on service over the bridges, and so escaped the fate of their beds; one of the three, Phil Arundel, has since been killed as a flying man in France, and another, Lionel Sessions, afterwards lost his leg in our service. But the fourth occupant of the room, Hamish Allan, was in bed, and was severely wounded. After that we constructed a fine dug-out beside the house, in which we took great pride as the work of our own hands and of our scanty leisure. The design, however, was not entirely our own; for we profited by the

technical advice of an Italian officer of *genio*, who looked in on us one day, and, after reviewing the dug-out as we were then constructing it, remarked, " There are two sorts of dug-outs—a dug-out to live in, and a dug-out to die in. This is a dug-out to die in."

One day some of us were royally entertained at lunch by the officers of the 24th Sezione Sanità in Gorizia. After the Intesa toasts in Asti, they brought in a very fat common soldier, who without preface burst into song—Verdi's " Otello "—with a baritone voice as powerful as Plunkett Greene's, and of marvellous beauty. In the little dining-room it seemed to endanger the stability of the walls. We hurriedly opened the windows, and it drowned the cannon which were roaring in the garden fifty yards away. It was one of the most surprising scenes at which I have ever attended. He sings in the great opera houses in Italy, thereby corresponding in popular position to the Matador in Spain, and is now a common soldier in the Sanità. My experience is that ordinary Italian voices when singing are more discordant than ordinary English voices, but that there are a large number of voices of this baritone type in Italy which for volume and beauty are absolutely unmatched in England.

The training that such voices undergo for the severe

purpose of classical Italian opera is analogous to the training of professional athletes in England. The popular interest in the opera, which would bore an English audience to tears, is very genuine and very remarkable. There is comparatively little corresponding in Italy to the song-books of England or of Scotland, either to the beautiful and serious repertory of times gone by or to the music hall and *revue* choruses of to-day. But the classical opera is a national passion. In July 1918 the staff of the 11th Division, which we had served in the battle of the previous month, invited some of us to their divisional theatre, where, every night so long as the division was *in riposo*, men and officers entertained their comrades. And how did they entertain them? Mainly by excellent renderings of the most famous passages from the operas of Verdi and Rossini. Our hosts told us that they had taken the idea of a divisional theatre from a British division with whom they had fraternized on the Asiago plateau.* But I am sure the British divisional theatre had a very different and more variegated programme. *Suum cuique tributo.*

Our own life in Gorizia during that winter of 1916,

* The *teatro del soldato* had been started here and there on the old Isonzo front shortly before the Retreat. But that was run by artists imported from Italy. The 11th Division's theatre was run by the soldiers of the division themselves.

as at all other times, was cheerful and interesting enough ; but for the *povero fante*, the patient Italian infantryman, life was becoming a sordid and weary misery. Here was the second winter spent by him far away from his beloved family and farm in the hollow of the Apennine or in the rich alluvial plain, spent by him in slavelike drudgery amid damp trenches and grimy ruins, for a cause that had never been intelligibly explained to him by the book-learned who had dragged him from his home. The bright hopes of victory held out in the early autumn by the taking of Gorizia, the Russian victories, and the entry of Rumania, had ended in the dismal Russian Betrayal No. 1.

About this time Mr. Lloyd George made his famous speech in which the war was likened unto a sporting prize fight. The figure pleased not the Italians, otherwise well content with our new Premier. Now it chanced that we had in the Unit some ambulances generously provided by the Sportsman's Fund, President Lord Lonsdale. This fact was properly painted in large letters on the bodies of the cars. More than one Italian came up to us in Gorizia that winter to complain of the brave inscription. " Oh yes ! Lloyd George has said so. You English think this war is sport ! " In vain we discoursed on the various mean-

ings of the word "sport," and the particular character of the Sportsman's Fund. No; it was an offence. Even on our ambulances we announced to our too patient allies that the war was sport!

One excellent feature of the Italian occupation of Gorizia was the treatment of civilians who still insisted on clinging to their homes in spite of the bombardment. It is arguable that they should all have been removed; there were a fair number of casualties, and almost certainly some who remained were spies. But since it was decided that they might stay, it was well that everything was done to render their life supportable. The Italian military authorities supplied them with food, and enabled them to get down periodically to Udine to market. We helped to supply clothes to the civilians, especially to the children; and this first brought Geoffrey Young, who had the matter in hand, into contact with the most notable civilian in Gorizia, Sister Matilda at the convent. Several hundred children came there every day for food and schooling, and some resided there altogether. Their happy child's life went on during day after day of the wrath of man, subterraneously in time of danger, at other times emerging into the courtyards of the gradually crumbling convent. I never met a finer woman than Sister Matilda, or a wiser. She took

her part in this world and was shrewd in her judgments of it, yet she moved " above the *mêlée*." When finally, late in 1917, they took the children from her and sent them to Leghorn, it seemed a cruel necessity, but necessary indeed it was, for the building was being hit every day. She remained on among the ruins, and we found her there still, serene and practical as ever, when we returned on the tide of final victory in November 1918.

In the early part of the winter of 1916–17 the Emperor Francis Joseph, known to every Italian as " Cecco Beppe," died on the precarious throne which he had occupied for all but seventy years. Called to the uneasy heritage in 1848, when the old Austrian Empire of Metternich was in actual dissolution, and only Radetzky's army stood firm, he had, contrary to expectation, and contrary to the world's true interest, succeeded by no little valour and wisdom in holding together, first under German-Austrian, and then under German and Magyar tyranny, all those peoples, nations, and languages. This artificial structure, full seventy years too old, now depended for a further lease of life on Prussia's victory in the world contest. One is glad that the old man did not live to see the fall.

The feeling against " Cecco Beppe " in Italy was personal. He was the man of whom their fathers had

told them. His soldiers had hunted Garibaldi and Anita in the marshes ; his armies had held insolent sway in half the fairest cities of Italy ; his hangmen had hung the martyrs ; and, since the union of Italy, his officials had persecuted their brothers of the lands still unredeemed. So when the old man died there was no pretence of any feeling but satisfaction.

From that moment forward one noticed a further shifting of Italian hatred from Austria to Germany, from the mask to the face behind it. It is true that this change was hastened by many other causes besides the old Emperor's death ; indeed, Italy had declared war on Germany before he died. But the traditional feeling against " Cecco Beppe " could not be transferred to " Carlo and Zita ; " the young couple were good-humouredly despised or pitied, never hated. I remember, for instance, a mural monument which the Austrians had erected near their dug-outs on Oslavia hill. After its capture in August 1916 the Italians had decorated it with a portrait of " Cecco Beppe " as the deuce. But later on, after his death, the pictured fiend took on the likeness of a Prussian in his spiked helmet. During 1917 mural decoration at the front became more and more anti-German. One house in a village of the plain was illuminated on the wall facing the street by an

enormous fresco of a cloaked Prussian figure cutting off the hands of a Belgian child. What was more important, patriotic talk ran more and more on anti-German lines, based on a broader understanding of the world struggle against the spirit of military despotism. With this went a better understanding of England's part and policy.

During the winter of 1916–17 I composed a lecture on Garibaldi which was translated into very choice Italian by my friend Major Lionello De Lisi, whose medical science is adorned by his literary gifts and lofty, patriotic enthusiasm. I gave our lecture first to the officers in Udine, at the invitation of the Comando Supremo; then to mixed civil and military audiences in Milan, Treviso, and Venice. At Venice, being the guest of Professor Pietro Orsi and the Athenæum, I got an inside view of some of the leading patriotic families of the "home front," and of the remarkable civic life of the Queen of the Waters. As we shouldered our way through the narrow *Merceria*, Orsi said to me that the absence of horses and carriages had made Venice more equalitarian than any other city in Italy. Since riding horses were forbidden in 1300 A.D., the leading citizens and their wives have always had to rub shoulders with the crowd.

The Venetians were very valiant and patriotic,

though the war hit them harder than any one else in Italy. With their port closed and the *forestieri* away fighting each other, their two main occupations were gone. But Venice had risen to meet her own needs. A Citizens' Committee, of which my hosts were active members, had in good time procured vast war orders from Government of the kind that could be done in Venice, and had distributed the work and the requisite raw material among the small workshops and private houses of the *popolani*. Woodwork for shell cases and barrows, soldiers' clothing, small iron work and children's toys, to replace the German, were the chief. The Citizens' Committee had also set up a scientifically-managed relief system, and a distribution of milk for infants. Largely in consequence of this organized mutual aid, Venice had a finer feeling of patriotic fellowship, and was more ready to go on with the war than other cities whose industries were far less crippled, or had even been stimulated by the fact of the war. I came away from that visit with an historic sense of the undying spirit of Venetian democracy and fellow-citizenship with which Manin had worked his miracles.

During the same winter, the Commissioner, Lord Monson, brought round Mr. E. V. Lucas to see the British Red Cross work in Italy. The visit pleased and

encouraged us, and resulted in a characteristically delightful and kindly tractate on our work, entitled, "Outposts of Mercy."

The road to Trieste, chosen as the principal battlefield on which Italy and Austria wore down each other's "will to resist," in the continuous and bloody warfare of 1915–17, was divided into two parts—the Plava-Gorizia zone to the north, and the Carso to the south. Our Unit did no service on the Carso, but in the year 1917 I paid several visits to that strange land, sometimes to Italian friends, sometimes to Mr. Alexander's Third B.R.C. Unit, and sometimes to the officers of General Hamilton's batteries.

The Carso is a world by itself. It is limestone tableland, lying between the Gorizia valley and the sea, and stretching along the coast beyond Trieste. Its sides facing north and west are partly wooded, but the tableland itself has no vegetation higher than grass and stunted brushwood. The earth is red, the limestone white; in winter these are the two colours of the Carso, but in summer an outcrop of green grass completes the Italian tricolour. The sparse villages, all ruined and unroofed by the war, each visible for miles away on that high, flat wilderness, were inhabited in peace time by

herdsmen, for the patches of grass are good pasturage in spring. Indeed, our South Africans compared the Carso to the veldt.

To me, as a North Englander, the character of the ground at close quarters recalled the top of the limestone scars of Yorkshire and Westmorland, only, instead of being, like Whitbarrow, a mile across and a few miles long, the Carso is seven miles across and more than twenty long. Indeed, the more distant view, with the illimitable desert spaces rising into low hills far away, was like a Scotch or Northumbrian moor stript of bent and heather, if such a monstrosity can be conceived.

But the native peculiarity of the Carso was the *doline*, or cup-shaped hollows, each twenty, fifty, or more yards across, said to have been worn by the action of water collected for ages in the flat limestone surface. In these hollows, which were counted by the hundred, men, huts, and guns were hidden away by both sides, so that when half a million soldiers were inhabiting that uncanny wilderness, it looked more deserted than in peace time, and yet no available cover was to be seen. Nothing, in fact, was visible except the ruins of the villages, the screening of the roads, the stone walls raised by the shepherds, and an occasional car scudding swift and silent across the ominous ambushed desert where

Browning's Childe Roland might well have found the Tower.

Over this terrible land, from June 1915 to October 1917, the Third Army, under the Duke of Aosta, won its way, yard by yard. The Carso yields as little shade or water as the Sahara, and its splintering rock doubled the effect of every shell. Those can judge best of Italy's effort who walk over that ground, as they now safely may, viewing line after line of broken wire entanglements, and of trenches blasted out in the rock surface and then blown to pieces by bombardment.

The Italian advance progressed farthest along the northern edge of the Carso, overlooking Gorizia, till finally, from well beyond Faiti, the rear of the enemy's San Marco position could be enfiladed.* But to the south, along the sea coast, progress beyond Monfalcone was well-nigh physically impossible, though it was desperately attempted in the summer of 1917. For here the steep Hermada, or hill of Medeazza, blocked the coast road to Trieste. Across the western approach to Hermada, as if by a prevision on nature's part of Austria's needs in this war, stretched a reedy marshland, lying between the Carso and the sea, passable only by narrow causeways and long wooden foot-

* For this paragraph see Map VI., p. 97 above.

bridges over the sullen water. Any one viewing the region wonders not why the Italians failed to establish themselves on Hermada, but how they at any time succeeded in crossing the marsh.*

In the spring of 1917 the British batteries, under General Hamilton, arrived on the Italian front, the first combatant troops of any Allied Power. Their guns at one moment rose to the number of sixty-four. By that time the French also had batteries in the zone of Gorizia and the Middle Isonzo ; but the British batteries always served the Third Army, some of them being placed in *doline* on the Carso tableland, and others, more fortunate in the heat of the summer, on the banks of the Vipacco where it flows deep, a joy to bathers, through the fertile country below the northern edge of the Carso. As the season advanced, General Hamilton put his men into slouch hats of the Colonial type as a protection against the sun ; they never appeared in the sun helmets that distinguished Lord Cavan's army in Italy in the following year. They got on very well with the Italians. Politically as well as militarily the experiment was a decided success, and if the unity of front had been

* It was in the great Italian offensive here in May–June, 1917, that Mr. Davis of the 3rd B.R.C. Unit was killed in Monfalcone, leaving a memory very pleasant to his comrades.

complete, might have encouraged the Allies to send some English and French divisions to aid the push on Bainsizza that autumn. But the German divisions came instead. Otherwise it is possible that instead of Caporetto we might have had the crumbling of Austria-Hungary at the end of 1917 instead of a year later. Many thought this at the time; and from all that we have learnt now that the armistice has lifted the veil on the internal condition of the enemy countries, they may think so more strongly than before. But for good or for ill the fates had willed it otherwise, perhaps for the more complete final discomfiture of the Dynasts. Before the triumphant close, a huge and terrible Fourth Act of the drama had yet to be played, searching the souls of men and nations, and teaching us children of earth to—

> "let determined things to destiny
> Hold unbewailed their way."

CHAPTER VI.

The great Italian offensives from Plava and Gorizia, May and August-September 1917 — Kuk, Santo, Bainsizza, San Gabriele — The Italian high-water mark reached.

IN May 1917 the long Isonzo gorge stretching from Tolmino to the Gorizia plain still divided the opposing armies, except for the Italian *tête-de-pont* at Plava and the Austrian *tête-de-pont* at Santa Lucia, farther north. The gorge was contained on the Italian side by one long, unbroken ridge, from two to three thousand feet in height, and largely clothed with oak woods. The ridge began at the southern end with Monte Sabotino, went on with Monte Planina and Monte Corada above the Plava bottom, turned sharply westward at the heights whence one looked down into the deserted streets of Tolmino, and finally dropped through steep forests into Caporetto. Before the summer of 1917 the *genio* had completed a vast system of high-level roads from Sabotino to Caporetto along the top of this ridge and a whole network behind and athwart it. By means of these

smooth and well-graded mountain roads hundreds of heavy cannon were placed along the ridge that summer, destined to blow the Austrians out of their positions beyond the Isonzo gorge, but too many doomed after that to be left behind in their mountain emplacements in the great Retreat.

Besides our work in Gorizia and Plava, our Unit had out-stations of ambulances on this ridge near Liga and Kambresko, as well as down in Caporetto itself. Driving that summer along that new high-level road with plain and sea and distant Western Alps in view on one side, and on the other the Isonzo gorge and the enemy heights beyond, on to which we were soon to cross, was the most exhilarating of all our customary routes. For not only was Nature seen in every direction in her most majestic aspects, whether of mountain, plain, or sea, but along the road itself one was in the very heart of preparations for a mighty effort of human skill and purpose, to which the keen upland air seemed to impart its own energy. Wooden *baracche* were rising tier above tier on the steepest parts of the mountain where the angle gave most protection from bombardment; here huts were being built out on platforms over the yawning chasm of a precipice round which the roadside curled; there yet

another battery was being placed under a grove of chestnut trees.

In this busy and exalted region we became associated with the 4th Bersagliere Regiment, under Colonel Gotti, during the operations of the spring of 1917. Our first hope was that we should cross the Isonzo with them above Canale, where it was rumoured that the main operation of the coming offensive would take place; we had our plans ready for an advance down the lanes on the side of the great gorge. But when the May offensive began, it soon turned out that the attack of the Bersaglieri above Canale was only a feint, which they performed, indeed, with daring, skill, and success, throwing across footbridges under a heavy fire, and driving the enemy up the steep mountains on the farther shore. But then, to their intense chagrin, they were recalled, because the real blow was being delivered against Monte Kuk from Plava, whither our ambulances had been transferred.

I have described earlier * the extraordinary position of the *tête-de-pont* beyond the Isonzo at Plava, where the Italians maintained themselves from June 1915 to May 1917 under every imaginable disadvantage; how

* See pp. 71–75 above.

their trenches at Zagora ran athwart the steep slope of Monte Kuk, with the Austrian trenches a few yards above them; how all their stores had to be carried across the shelled pontoon bridge at Plava bottom at the only spot where the river could be crossed not actually in sight of the Austrians; and how Plava bottom itself could be reached by wheeled traffic only along a single narrow road from Verhovlje, closely overlooked from across the Isonzo by the Austrians on Monte Kuk.

The failure of the offensive from Plava in August 1916 had been due partly to these local conditions and partly to want of co-ordination with the plans for the more successful attack on Gorizia.* In 1917 the forces of the Gorizia and Plava regions had been wisely united into one "Army of Gorizia," under General Capello. He and his Chief of Staff, General Badoglio, saw that the spell of chronic and now traditional failure of every effort to lift the Italians out of the hole that they were in at Plava on to the summit of Monte Kuk could be broken only by providing a second roadway down to the Plava bridgehead. On the existing exposed, one-way road from Verhovlje it was impossible to take down enough material for such an operation as the capture of Monte Kuk, still less of Monte Santo and the Bainsizza

* See pp. 101–102 above.

MAP VII.—The Offensive from Plava, May 1917.

(Italian line after the offensive is shaded. Before that it ran from near Globna to Zagora, where it fell into the river. The road of the "thirty-two hairpins," coming down from Mte. Corada to Plava, was only completed early in May 1917.)

beyond. The new road was opened only a few days before the May offensive began. It was generally spoken of as " Badoglio's road," but in our Unit we called it the road of " the thirty-two hairpins." It was a wonderful piece of engineering, but slow work for a car with a bad lock ! Henceforth lorries and ambulances came down to Plava bottom by the " thirty-two hairpins " from Monte Corada in the north, and returned to the upper world again by the old narrow road to Verhovlje. This change more than doubled the amount of heavy material that could be brought by lorries and dumped at the Plava bridge for porterage. It also enabled the Italian and British ambulances to get many thousands of wounded away quickly during the battle.

The new road came down through carefully-selected folds of the mountain side, and through forests that afforded considerable cover from the enemy. But the moment the cars came out into Plava bottom and approached the bridge they were exposed to a heavy barrage by which the enemy hoped to cut the slender communications of the new offensive. Several cars, including one of our ambulances, were completely destroyed. Indeed, it was a remarkable scene by night or day, in the narrow space near the pontoon bridge. Everything that fed the great battle on Monte Kuk, and

all the returning wreckage of that fierce strife, had to pass and repass by mule or porterage over the string of boats swaying in the swift flood.* In the lee of a shattered house just above the bridge the wounded were laid out by scores at a time on their stretchers, waiting for the cars to carry them up out of the valley of death. Beside them in the narrow space, the war material brought down by the lorries was dumped in piles, picked up, and carried off over the pontoons. Above all this crush and confusion the enemy's shrapnel burst in periodic gusts of fury, striking the wounded where they lay, and rendering the unloading of the lorries and loading of the ambulances a task requiring the cool energy of the lieutenants and *aspiranti* (cadets) in charge of the operation. In these difficult moments the young officers gladly accepted the co-operation of Philip Baker, who had now permanently taken up his quarters in the valley bottom with the section of our cars under his command. In these days and nights of May we began to make many good friends down in Plava.

Meanwhile, across the river the battle on Monte Kuk was speeding well. The sheer mountain side, unscaleable for two years, was falling at last. The

* As the battle progressed another footbridge was thrown across opposite Zagora.

Italian preliminary bombardment, like that on Sabotino the year before, destroyed in a few hours the Austrian wire and trenches. Then the infantry, launched to the assault, climbed straight up the steepest part of the long slope ; it was as though one should storm Bow Fell from Mickelden bottom in the face of machine guns and rifle fire of a determined enemy. Having reached the summit, they worked along the crest in a series of desperate engagements of attack and counter-attack. Every arm—infantry, *genio*, artillery—vied in their zeal. A few days after its capture I saw on the top of Monte Kuk some Italian " seventy-fives " that had been dragged up, Heaven knows how, by sheer strength of arm and will during the *mêlée* itself. By May 22nd, after ten days' fighting as fierce as any in the war, not only Monte Kuk but the greater part of Vodice and the lower slopes of Monte Santo had been captured.

It was now possible to repair and bring back into use the permanent Plava bridge, no longer in sight of the enemy. This relieved the dangerous congestion which I have described on the west bank of the Plava bottom, for wheeled traffic could now cross the Isonzo and even run for a few kilometres along the valley road at the bottom of the gorge that goes towards Gorizia

between Monte Kuk and Monte Santo on one side, and Monte Sabotino on the other. Although the enemy were still on the summit of Monte Santo, the Italian line had been moved across the river the whole way from Salcano to Plava.

It was while working on this road that we got our first complete view of the back of Sabotino. Its precipices that fall straight from the summit into the Isonzo waters are very different in character from the other side of the mountain, the smooth, sloping battlefield that we had watched so long from Quisca.* The limestone buttresses that washed their feet in the river were so steep that military operations on that face of Sabotino were out of the question. In the forests that clambered among these cliffs, too steep for man's abode or warfare, some wild deer had maintained themselves for a year past, secure as in the Forest of Arden, yet all the while in the forefront of the battle-line. High over their heads the Italian cannon fired from the rock chambers of Sabotino, through windows pierced in its summit to command Kuk, Santo, and Gabriele. At night time that road along the gorge was full of wonder and of

* See pp. 47–49 above. The Austrians, when they held Sabotino in 1915–16, had made a funicular up one of the gullies on the Isonzo face. It was visible in 1917.

beauty: the pinnacles of Sabotino, far overhead among the stars, yet belching fire from mid-rock; the invisible stream heard close at hand, the only voice in the valley; the two noiseless hosts, a felt presence, unseen; the searchlights shifting slow from mountain head to mountain head, now lighting Gabriele's bald sconce, now striking the last thin stick of ruined convent on Monte Santo's crest, throwing it out, dazzling white between black mountain and black sky, still erect and pointing, "like death's lean lifted forefinger."

The *genio* lost little time after the victory in May. Monte Kuk is steep and rugged, rising nearly 2,000 feet from the river; but a few days after its capture the Italian water-pipes and *teleferiche* were supplying the needs of the troops on its summit, and in twenty-six days the *genio* had constructed from base to crest of the mountain a winding road of seven kilometres, with perfect gradient and surface, at the cost of several hundred casualties among the roadmakers. Less than a month after the battle had given the roadless mountain side to the Italians, their heavy guns were going up by tractor to emplacements on the top; while lorries with military stores, and our ambulances bringing down the wounded, were passing and repassing on the road to the crest of Monte Kuk. At the same time the *perforatrici* (machine

drills) were everywhere hollowing out new caverns in the mountain side and along the river bank, making life every day a little safer on the newly-conquered ground, in spite of the increasing volume of artillery fire due to the constant transfer of enemy guns that summer from the crumbling Russian front. Without the Kuk road and the machine drills the maintenance of the new positions, let alone the advance over Bainsizza in the autumn, would have been utterly impossible.

At the same time the old Verhovlje road was broadened ; a fine new road was made from the north-west end of Sabotino to join the river road below Zagora ; and yet another new road was constructed forwards from Plava up the pass at Palliovo to a point just short of what was then the new Italian line. All this work, besides the making of the new trenches and gun emplacements, was accomplished in two months within a single area of a few kilometres from Plava. I doubt whether any other army would have done as much work in the same time and space.

While Young continued in Gorizia with half our ambulances, Philip Baker had during the May battle taken up quarters in Plava bottom with the other half.*

* Our First Unit ambulances now numbered between thirty and forty. We were replaced at Caporetto this summer by the Second B.R.C. Unit, under Mr. Sargant, which also worked in Carnia.

It was always difficult to find within a mile of Plava a flat bit of ground that was not either shelled too many times a day, or had not already been occupied by some one else. We managed, however, to park our cars near the great railway viaduct at the foot of the little Val Grune, where its stream debouches from the woodland steeps into the Isonzo. There we pitched our tent and secured also a wooden hut for use by day; but we slept in the rocks above in a shepherd's grotto shared with some Italian friends, as the bottom of the dell was searched by shells every night.

During that strange summer the remote and uninhabited Val Grune was as busy as a London street. The foot and mule traffic came down that way from Monte Planina; and under the railway arches the prisoners were collected as they came in from across the Isonzo, before being marched off through the woods overhead. Here we had our advanced quarters from May till we went on to the Bainsizza late in August, and even then we retained our hut and tent as an intermediate base until the Retreat two months later. After the year of exile on the Piave had gone by, I revisited the Isonzo gorge one day in November 1918, to say to those remembered scenes Hail and Farewell! The once so busy banks by Plava bridge had fallen still and silent. The

fever of war had passed away, leaving the valley dead. The sadness of the ruined houses of Plava village, never felt during the lively scenes and doings of the former year, oppressed the soul now that all was empty and desolate. But in the Val Grune, the solitary dell where no house had ever stood, it was a relief to see the reign of Nature restored. Only some military litter round our decaying hut gave proof of man's brief, incongruous irruption into the dreaming vale, where the winter woods rose tier above tier in beauty regnant once more. Man's presence is doubtless an improvement upon earth, but in some places it is very nice when he goes away.

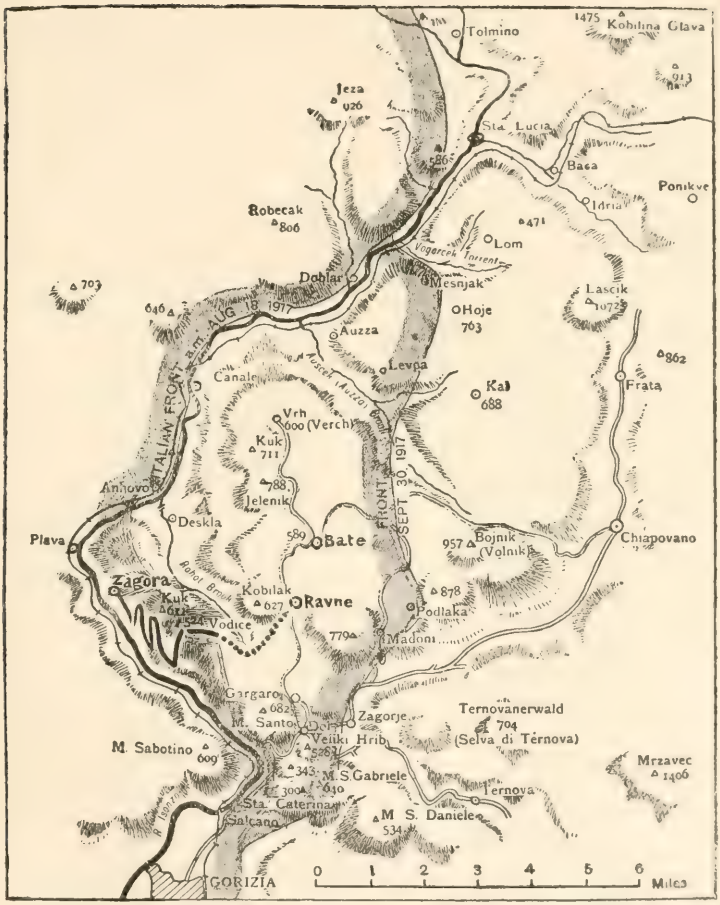
In the three months between the battles of May and of August 1917, we saw much at Plava and Gorizia of the Italian officers, with whom comradeship in recent events had made us more than ever intimate. The advanced clearing station in the rock gallery, hollowed out at the base of Plava hill, where a hundred and fifty patients could lie in perfect safety and considerable comfort, was the base to which we now carried back the wounded from the front. The dominating genius of the place was Major Scarsella, in charge of the Sezione Sanità. Under his individual rule and inspiration Plava became, not only a great place for work, but in the intervals of war a social centre as congenial and amusing

as any to which it has been my fortune to be made welcome.

At that time I was deeply interested in the preparations of America for serious entry into the war which she had proclaimed against Germany. The "enrolling" on June 5th of so many millions over there without a hitch seemed to me an event of infinite moment and promise. But I found that my Italian friends did not yet believe in America. The officers had fewer ties with the great Republic than the men, as the Italian emigration to North America is almost wholly of the less-educated class. Neither had America yet declared war on Austria, or shown any interest in Italy. It was mainly to England that the Italian War Party still looked. My enthusiastic asseverations that Mr. Wilson and his fellow-citizens were preparing to go *fino in fondo* were received by my Italian friends in kindly but obviously incredulous silence. It is interesting to recall this now, because in 1918 America came to loom almost unnaturally large in the Italian eye. But in 1917 it was not so, and when, therefore, the Russians failed again, the discouragement was the greater. Many began to see little chance of winning the war, as week after week during that summer and autumn more and more Austrian batteries and battalions gave evidence of their arrival

from the Russian front. But in spite of all this, the finest effort of the Italian army was made in the last half of August and the first half of September 1917. It was only after that magnificent and largely successful effort had proved inconclusive that the fruits of discouragement were reaped in late October.

The month of the most continuously fierce fighting in the whole Italian war opened on August 18, 1917, with a general bombardment from Tolmino to the sea. The guns massed along the Corada ridge searched the Austrian positions beyond the Isonzo. Next day, along the front from Plava northwards to Doblar, the infantry bridged and crossed the rapid river in face of the enemy, and began to ascend the eastern bank of the gorge. A more difficult operation, in face of machine-gun posts and a determined foe entrenched in ground of such vantage, has seldom been allotted to any force in the world war. Here and there a politically weak link in the enemy armour, like the Czechs on Monte Jelenik, rendered a general success just possible. Gradually, as day followed day of carnage, point after point was won. The high-lying hamlet of Vrh fell, and Hill 711, keys to a whole region. Near Plava, operations began with a false attack on Monte Santo to the south, while



MAP VIII.—Taking of the Bainsizza Plateau, Aug.–Sept. 1917.

(The whole region to north and south of Bate is called the Bainsizza Plateau.)

to the north the foot of the Rohot valley was seized. As we ran our cars up and down the road between Plava and the debouchment of that stream, we saw the line of the battle overhead getting nearer and nearer to the top of Jelenik, till at last it had completely fallen. The Czech prisoners came pouring down the heights into Plava, men whom we were to see again next year in Italian uniforms, with their national colours mounted on the Alpino hat, playing a great part in the Allies' " peace offensive," and no mean part in Italy's war.

But far to northward there was a serious set back. The attempt to turn from the south the positions of the enemy in the Santa Lucia and Tolmino region was held to be so important that General Badoglio himself had charge of that operation.* But the Austrians could not be dislodged from their fastness round Lom protected by the steep banks of the Vogercek torrent. By this failure the strategic way was left open for the disaster of Caporetto.

The fall of Jelenik was followed on the 23rd and 24th of August by the decisive battle on Vodice and

* Badoglio was now put in command of the 2nd Army Corps. He had been Capello's Chief of Staff when Capello commanded the Gorizia (and Plava) army in May 1917. Now the Gorizia army was merged in the larger Second Army (including the 2nd Army Corps); this army took in the Santa Lucia and Caporetto regions, and was placed under Capello's command.

Kobilek, which opened out the Italian advance over the south of the Bainsizza plateau, as the victory on Jelenik had already opened it out over the part to the north. On the crest and flanks of Vodice both sides had been entrenched at close quarters ever since the battle in May. The hero of Vodice was the fine old soldier, General Prince Gonzaga. He combined a complete control of the operations of his Division with a boyish enjoyment of danger, a perpetual appearance on the top of the disputed mountain and a gaiety which won the hearts of his soldiers and of all who came near him. On the 24th of August he and his troops had the reward of their long vigil ; the whole system of Austrian trenches running from the farther part of Vodice round the head of the Rohot valley on to Kobilek itself, after being subjected to a destructive bombardment, was stormed in the grand style.

Once this obstacle was passed, the pursuit went raging over the Bainsizza plateau with the dash characteristic of the Italians whenever they are well led. Part of the enemy were driven steeply down into the Gargaro valley and chased along it to the northern foot of San Gabriele. Monte Santo was turned, surrounded, and forced to surrender ; at long last the " red, white, and green " waved over the ruined convent on the

summit, that Italian eyes had gazed on so enviously for two long years.*

Farther to the north the conquerors of Kobilek, sweeping across the valley in which Ravne village lies, mounted the limestone crags of the heights beyond, which might have been easily defended, and had, indeed, been prepared for defence, but were carried in that first triumphant rush. On the afternoon of the 24th of August, standing on a line of trenches near Vodice in which the Austrians had been that morning, Baker and I saw a little string of men, black against the white limestone, struggling up those heights beyond Ravne, three miles away as the crow flies. At first we thought they were retreating Austrians, but presently, when the batteries on Ternovo began to shell them, we realized that they were the Italians who had a few hours before stormed the ground we stood on, and were now ranging over hill and valley like hounds on the trail. The string of men soon disappeared over the mountain top, where they and their comrades established on the far side the farthest line that Italy ever reached before the great Retreat.

* See frontispiece. Monte Santo used to be visible against the sky-line not only from near Gorizia in 1916, but from Quisca in 1915, over the shoulder of Sabotino. When we first saw it there was a fine group of buildings on the top, but before it was taken these had become by successive stages a heap of rubble.

It was clear that two or three days must elapse before wheeled traffic could follow the infantry beyond Vodice. The excellent road made by the *genio* that summer led up from Zagora as far as the Pass 524 (metres) between Vodice and Kuk, to which point ambulances and lorries as well as artillery and carts freely came ; but beyond this pass-top, on the recent No Man's Land, and the scene of so much long and fierce fighting, the old Austrian road had disappeared entirely from sight in a wilderness of trenches, counter-trenches, and shell craters. Already, indeed, the deft *genio* were at work to link up the rest of the army with the vanguard who had gone on across the Bainsizza, but it was not to be done in a day.

Returning down to the Isonzo gorge, we went that night by the long-deserted river road to Salcano and Gorizia to exchange news with Young and our drivers there. The rumours in the town were of an immediate attack on San Gabriele ; fires seen on Ternovo plateau were eagerly watched, in the belief that the Austrians were destroying their stores prior to retreat. Hope ran high. Indeed, it seemed the very moment to push home on Gabriele the moral effect of the victory on Vodice and Santo. But several days went by before an effort was made against anything except the fringes of the fortress mountain.

Meanwhile we fretted on Vodice top and along the gorge road past Canale, but could as yet find no way by which cars could reach either Vrh or Ravne. Beyond those villages we knew there were passable roads; but how to get there? Though our ambulances had work carrying down to Plava the wounded who arrived by hand at Pass 524, or at the foot of the Rohot valley, it irked us to be thrown out of the hunt three or four miles behind the infantry on Bainsizza, and to think that every man wounded had at best to be carried by hand all that way back over the rough mountains in the scorching sun. But indeed our position as regards the transport of wounded was only part of the serious question of interrupted communications that might at any moment be fatal to the Italian vanguard, thrust forward beyond Ravne without artillery, water, or supplies. The *genio* were hard at work by hundreds repairing the road to Ravne, but under a heavy fire. The Austrian batteries, so far from having left Ternovo, were being daily strengthened, and had settled down to the policy of keeping the road to Ravne impassable, which they pursued with partial success for three weeks to come.

By the evening of August 26th the road to Ravne had been so far reconstructed that artillery and horse

carts were passing over it, though not without difficulty. Hoping that motor traffic would be allowed next day, I walked across the moor to Ravne to prepare the way there for our cars. Arriving after nightfall, I sought the authorities, and found General Gonzaga's headquarters in a little house behind and above the rest of the hamlet. I came only for information and orders, but I got a dinner, a welcome such as would have befitted a brigadier, and, finally, the only other bed beside the General's. He was in particularly good spirits, having just been knocked over and slightly wounded by a shell. At dinner we had excellent talk about Garibaldi and other subjects; the Staff officers were a most interesting and agreeable set of men, much elated by the work they had in hand. The General warmly invited me to bring along the ambulances if they could possibly come, and promised us every accommodation that Ravne could afford.

Walking back at dawn on the 27th, I met a number of ambulances on Vodice under our car officer, Mr. Dyne, trying to get through in a crush with the artillery and carts. Some way along the road the route over the moor comes into full view of the gunners on the Ternovo plateau, and from that point forward the road was under so heavy a fire that the traffic authorities were soon com-

pelled to stop the progress of the column, halting it out of sight of the enemy. Fortunately our two leading cars were the last vehicles to be let pass, and so were the first ambulances, and I think the first automobiles, to reach the Bainsizza. Half-way between Vodice and Ravne, at a ruined hamlet called Baske, we found the narrow road blocked for us by deserted cannon-limbers at the point where the Ternovo gunners were specially concentrating their fire. Fortunately we found the drivers in a neighbouring dug-out, where they had taken refuge after their horses had been killed. On having our predicament explained to them they very kindly came back and moved the encumbrance out of our way. So we got the two ambulances into Ravne that morning, and the others joined them when the rest of the column came on under cover of night.

The incident illustrates the immense difficulties of the Italian communications on Bainsizza, depending, as far as wheeled traffic was concerned, entirely on the Ravne road, which ran in full sight of the enemy. It was, besides, an execrable road, a mere country track, which the Austrians had never converted for military uses. We discovered that they had similarly left the road from Baté to Vrh in very bad condition. Thus the two roads which had for two years past linked up

their magazines with their front line on the Isonzo gorge had both been entirely neglected, though their roads farther east had been kept in tolerable condition. Was it a settled policy of the Austrians to have bad roads at the front in order that if the Italians advanced they should find communications so difficult that the pursuit would slow down ? If so, the plan was not unsuccessful. It was exactly the opposite policy to that of the Italians, who ran first-class roads almost up to the firing-line.

But indeed the transport systems of the Austrian and Italian armies diverged more and more fundamentally as the war went on. The Italians learnt to do as much as they could by motor traffic, because they had such plenty of magnificent Fiats; and the Austrians as little as they could, because the British blockade gradually deprived them of rubber. By the end of the war, as we found in the advance of November 1918, all their motors jolted along on iron tyres. It is not, then, surprising that in 1916–17 they had been in the habit of sending little or no motor traffic from the Bainsizza to their front line along the Isonzo heights; hence in part their indifference to the state of the roads at the front, since they used them in the main only for horse vehicles.

We had now the interest of living and working on the Bainsizza plateau. As in the case of the equally

famous "Asiago plateau," only a small part of it was flat. It chiefly consists of mountains, like Kobilek and yet higher groups to the east, enclosing between them the valley in which Ravne and Baté lie. But the whole district is on a high level, looking down into the vale of Gargaro. Although it is not so flat as the Carso, it has the same limestone surface and the same queer *doline* or cup-shaped hollows. At the bottom of some of these we saw mud-coloured guns and limbers in the dull yellow livery of Austria, derelict, or already turned round to do service against her. Here and there were patches of wood and scrapings of peasant cultivation, and in some districts the Austrian army had planted potatoes over a wide acreage. On the road back to Vrh the forests grew thick, but forward over the eastern heights, toward the firing line, and down southwards into the dangerous valley of Gargaro, hill and dale were singularly bare. The whole land wore a severe beauty.

But to us the most interesting as well as the most beautiful part of the landscape was our novel view of the back of captured Monte Santo and the north side of besieged San Gabriele, with the Italian shells perpetually bursting on its crest. Just on the other side we knew that our Gorizia cars were working up the Sella di Dol road, not far from the pass top, which we could clearly

see from the Bainsizza. Baker was in charge at Ravne and Young in Gorizia, while I, as my Italian friends used to say, was *sempre in giro* between the two, always going round by the long circuit of Plava—for though Ravne and the Sella di Dol are so near together, they were then still so far apart. I was thus able to get a very good general idea of the two closely-related battles of Bainsizza and San Gabriele, which raged in alternate spasms for the best part of a month.

Until the rough road to Vodice had been re-made by the *genio*—that is, for a week or more—it would have been murder to jolt the wounded of Bainsizza back over it in our cars. All we could do was to collect them from the heavily-shelled dressing-stations at Baté and elsewhere along the forward roads, and carry them to the field hospitals at Ravne. Here the famous movable surgery of the Città di Milano, Italian Red Cross,* had come to the aid of the regimental and divisional surgeons, who, cut off from proper supply, were gallantly struggling to make bricks without straw. Ravne, as being

* I should like to recall here the friendship we had with the Città di Milano everywhere, especially with Professor Baldo Rossi himself; at Quisca, at Ravne, and, later, on the Asiago plateau and on the Piave front we had many opportunities to admire their wonderful surgical work at the front, and to experience their kindness. General Bassi, head of the Italian Red Cross in the war zone, became our particular friend.

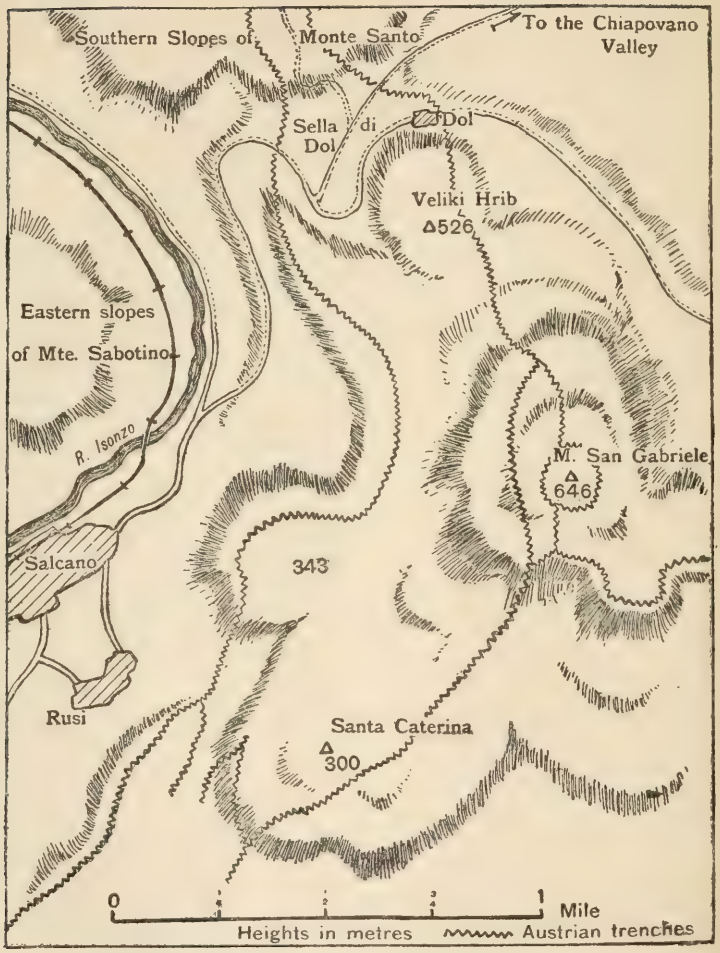
on the whole the safest of the shelled hamlets on the plateau, became for a while a great hospital centre to which all the wounded of the Bainsizza battle were now carried. At first there was not even a shelter for all the hundreds whom we brought in daily, and the surgeons and their staff were worked to the limit of human endurance.

It was, therefore, most necessary to evacuate the wounded from Ravne. But until the Vodice road was passable for wounded in ambulances, there was no way of evacuating except to compel the tired infantry, as they came back from the trenches for repose, to spend their exhausted energies in carrying their comrades by relays over the four miles of mountain tracks to the Isonzo, where, at the foot of the Rohot brook, our other ambulances met them, and carried them to the great clearing station at Plava. I cannot enough praise the sheer goodness of heart with which the *povero fante*, coming out half-starved and utterly exhausted from long days of battle without trenches or water, and looking only for a little rest, shouldered the heavy stretchers without a frown or a murmur because it was their brothers' burden.

It will therefore be seen that, during the last days of August and the first week of September, the position

of the Italians on the Bainsizza was highly critical on account of their imperfect communications. Meanwhile fresh enemy battalions as well as batteries were constantly arriving from Russia, and the Austrians would have had every chance of success if they had been able, with all the hosts now collecting on Ternovo, to attack the isolated force on the Bainsizza before it had made its trenches or established its communications. It was at this juncture that the great Italian assault on San Gabriele acted as a diversion which saved the Bainsizza ; the Austrian divisions had to be thrown one after another into the narrow pen of slaughter on Gabriele's crest, the smoking altar of sacrifice seen afar off by all the spectator armies between Carso and Monte Nero's top.

For us the battle of San Gabriele consisted of our service on the Sella di Dol road. The Sella, or " saddle," of Dol is the high pass that crosses the range between Monte Santo and San Gabriele ; over it winds the well-engineered road leading from Gorizia to the Bainsizza region. This pass top had fallen to the Italians together with Monte Santo, rendering it possible for them to proceed to the assault of San Gabriele's summit, as they could now work round by the northern as well as the southern side of the crest. Various divisions fought on



MAP IX.—Battle of San Gabriele, Aug.–Sept. 1917.

Santa Caterina and the lower slopes, but the 11th Division, which our Gorizia cars specially served, had the task of taking the crest from the saddle. The divisional communications ran up this famous road from the ruins at Salcano to the ruined inn that marked the top of the pass, where the system of Italian trenches now began. All supplies had to reach the combatants on the height by that road; the Austrians had the range of it, and kept up a fierce barrage, especially on the upper part of the road, which was clearly visible from their trenches a few hundred yards away.*

The medical chiefs of the 11th Division, our friends Major Farragiana and Captain Capocelatro, had established a dressing-station in a dug-out on the top of the Sella di Dol. Our cars came up the road to within a few yards of the inn on the top, or as far as the shell-holes of each day allowed passage. The ambulances were the only vehicles that used the road among the infantry and mules ascending and descending; and indeed, but for the combination of such romantic spirits as Farragiana, Capocelatro, and Geoffrey Young, I doubt if we should have been permitted to go beyond Salcano. But we saved many lives and limbs by so doing, and once

* In the background of the frontispiece, this Sella di Dol road is discernible, climbing up the side of San Gabriele.

the service was established it was impossible to break it off, for the infantry going up and down the road during those three weeks of battle came to regard the "Croce Rossa Britannica" as a familiar friend. The infantry officers told us that the sight of our buses up there was an encouragement to the men. One soldier, badly wounded but just able to walk, on being ordered by our friend the roadside surgeon to walk down the road, delighted him by saying, "No, Aspetto. Vado colla *Britannica*" ("No, I'll wait and go down in the *Britannica*").

In the early part of the battle, when, in the last nights of August, the full moon lit the crags with splendour, and the shells and searchlights awoke along each mountain crest, the view from that high and busy road was a dream of romance. Far below our feet the shining river swirled round the shoulder of the gorge, and the gigantic triangle in which Sabotino abruptly ends was streaked with ebony and ivory of white screes and dark brushwood. The spell was laid on the Italian soldier, not the least susceptible of the armed races of Europe. "O che bel monte!" "E un bel monte, Sabotino," I heard the passing infantry say as they plodded up the road, and a wounded man as he waited for his turn.

On such a night as that, the last of August, walking through the barrage in front of Metcalfe's car to clear the pack mules out of its way, Geoffrey Young was wounded by a shell, and subsequently lost his leg by amputation down at our own Villa Trento hospital. The feeling for our friend shown by all the Italian officers, and especially by our medical friends of the 11th Division, who had the first care of him in Salcano and Gorizia, touched us all, and we shall always be grateful for it.

The battle came to its climax, though by no means to its end, on September 4th, the day they stormed the summit. That morning early we found the road blocked for us by a shell-hole a little below the Sella, but we arranged that the wounded should be carried to a large quarry on the roadside that afforded protection, whence two of our cars carried them all morning in a series of short and very useful runs. In this service first Silvester and then Lionel Sessions were wounded; the latter lost his leg by amputation in Gorizia that afternoon.* After this the Italian authorities forbade us to run any more ambulances above

* For this action Young and Sessions were awarded the silver and Silvester the bronze medal, *al valore militare*. Early in August Young, Sessions, and Metcalfe had been already similarly decorated.

the point half-way up where the road became directly visible to the enemy.

It had been a day of victory. From the quarry that morning I had seen with sudden joy the Italian soldiers walking against the sky-line on the summit of San Gabriele. But, alas! it had still to be held, and the Italians had not carried all the slopes, or even Santa Caterina down below.

During the next ten days the fire grew hotter on the average upon the road, and although we now kept down on the lower half that was supposed to be sheltered, the infantry and muleteers were even there losing severely. In this period of the war both sides were using "big stuff" of great potency. One morning I saw thirty men lying dead in one dusty heap by the roadside. At other times heads and limbs, mingled with great rocks, lay scattered over the road. In the trenches up above doubtless it was many times worse. San Gabriele in the first half of September 1917 was a gruesome slaughter-house, with the massed artillery of both armies, now in a high state of efficiency, concentrating on it their fire from all points of the compass. The artificial caves that now (November 1918) are visible on the roadside were only constructed after the battle. When it was most needed, there was but little

shelter. The *perforatrici* (machine drills) that had done such good work in rendering Monte Kuk habitable at an early date that summer,* seemed to put in a later appearance on San Gabriele. There was, however, a large natural grotto on the roadside close above Salcano, where our friends of the 11th Division Sanità set up a wayside dressing-station. Our cars often changed their loads there, and there we made many friends, among others the medical *aspirante* Sacchi, grandson of Garibaldi's famous Mantuan surgeon of that name, which he honoured again in this war.

In all that butchery there was no one whom I admired more than the regimental stretcher-bearers on the mountain side, carrying their comrades with painful, patient steps down the rough slope until they struck the road and reached our cars, never hurrying, still less laying down the stretcher, when a shell sent all around them ducking and scampering.

During the ten days following the Italian capture of the summit (September 4th) division after division was flung in by both sides on to the top of San Gabriele, in "a fight for a natural fortress within as narrow limits of movement as any old battle for town or castle. It was a battle of appalling losses, for both defence

* See pp. 135–136 above.

and attack were implacable." * Let it rest at that. Finally the summit was divided between the two heroic armies.

The attack on San Gabriele, though it had made progress, had not succeeded. But as a diversion it had saved the Bainsizza. By the middle of September, when the fighting on San Gabriele died down, the Italians were well entrenched on Bainsizza, and their communications with the Isonzo had been re-established. The road from Ravne to Vodice had been re-made and screened, and was used by day and night. Our ambulances could now carry the wounded back over it, and lorries with supplies and ammunition came and went by the hundred. The shelling from Ternovo was considerable, especially after the San Gabriele battle died down. In two days after the middle of the month our men counted from the balcony of our house in Ravne as many as 600 shells bursting on or beside a stretch of 150 yards of the road within 300 yards of Ravne. But these 600 shells only

* John Buchan, "History of the War" (Nelson's), XXI. p. 22. John Buchan says the Italian loss in the month's offensive was 155,000, and that the enemy lost correspondingly. I know that the proportion of killed and gravely wounded to lightly wounded was higher than in battles before and after, owing to the greater part played on this occasion by heavy artillery. In the Piave battle in June 1918, machine-gun and rifle wounds were more common.

hit two bicycles and one lorry, and did not interrupt the traffic ; the screening saved the situation.

Meanwhile the *genio* were constructing a magnificent new road up the steep lift from Canale to Vrh, and had repaired the previously existing road from Vrh to Baté ; this northern route through Vrh, invisible to the enemy, became from September 19th onwards the principal line of communication between the Bainsizza and the Isonzo.

In the middle of September General Gonzaga and his 53rd Division had been replaced by the 44th Division, under General Papà—a young man, singularly *simpatico*. He inherited the old General's quarters in Ravne and his kind interest in us. On the day when I last quitted Ravne for English leave he was on the roadside as I left the hamlet. I remember his handsome, soldierly figure and kind face as he stood by the car bidding me good-bye. In England three weeks later I heard that he was dead, killed while visiting the trenches. Italy lost in him a servant of high promise.

By the middle of September 1917 the battles of San Gabriele and Bainsizza were over. The Italian success had been great, but the Russian collapse had prevented it from being pushed home. The limit of human endurance had been reached, and both sides settled down

exhausted on the ground where they found themselves. For a month past I had seen so much Italian heroism and had lived in such an atmosphere of sacrifice and determination that it never occurred to me that we were on the eve of a great moral and military disaster. Nor should we have been, if it had depended on the troops who had just been fighting at Gorizia, Bainsizza, and San Gabriele. General Capello justly put his confidence in them, but gave, I suppose, too little thought to certain untried elements who were being sent up to the quiet and neglected zone of Caporetto, now added to his over-expanded Second Army. If in 1916 his command had been too limited in area, it was now too big.

On September 22nd, at General Capello's headquarters at Cormons, I asked if I could safely take English leave, and was advised that I could go, as nothing would be doing for some time. In the garden outside the villa I saw the General in great spirits getting into his car. He called me up in his genial manner, thanked us for our service with many flattering expressions, and inquired, not for the first time, after our wounded. I told him I was going on leave, but would be back to see him finish his victory. *Sed dis aliter visum.*

CHAPTER VII.

Caporetto and the Retreat, October 1917.

NOW followed, as if from a blue sky, that tremendous cataclysm which almost ruined Italy and bade fair to ruin the cause of her Allies, but ended in giving to her a new national purpose and discipline, and to the Allies a closer unity. History, obedient to the popular instinct for the concentrated and the picturesque, has already decided to call the whole sequence of great events by the name of a little Alpine market-town. All the meanings now implied by the word "Caporetto"—the immense and complicated causes and effects of the disaster of which the military sweep over two provinces and the rally on the Piave were merely the symbols; the mentality and character of a race; the merits and defects of its political and educational system; the relations of the different classes and parties to the war; the enemy propaganda; the grievances of the soldiers at the front; the world-strategy of Ludendorff and the

new German tactics; the actions of Cadorna and his subordinates; Rapallo and the coming of the Allies; and all the shifting fortunes of that wide-flung winter battle-field—these things will fill volumes, shelves, and libraries in the generations to come. And, regardless of all this massive learning and controversy, the people's own tradition, told by the peasant at his fireside, will burn itself, deep as the shame and pride of Cannæ and its sequel, into the memory of the oldest civilized race in the world. Here I have only a few remarks to offer and a few scenes to describe, which have no claim to notice beyond the fact that I had lived long with the army most involved in the disaster, and that I was one of the straws whirled on that vast ebb-tide.

In order to understand the nature of the phenomenon, before inquiring into its causes, it is necessary to realize that there were three distinct categories of conduct among the Italian troops. To confuse any one of these three categories with either of the other two is to misunderstand the whole affair.

First, there were a few regiments who, in accordance with a previously-formed intention, abandoned their duty, and surrendered on purpose. This was "Caporetto" in the narrower and more strictly accurate sense, for it was only in that geographical zone that such be-

trayal occurred ; but unfortunately Caporetto was the key to the whole strategic position. The phenomenon of voluntary surrender had been so common in the Austrian army throughout the war, beginning with the early battles round Lemberg, that an elaborate system based on trustworthy machine gunners had been devised to meet it ; but it was so exceptional in the Italian army that it took the authorities who might have prevented it by surprise, and struck them with something akin to panic.

When, consequently, a general retreat had been ordered, the second category of conduct was observable in a much larger number of men. The army of Bainsizza, San Gabriele, and Gorizia, who had no thought of giving way when the enemy offensive began in the last week of October, successfully resisted the attacks made on their positions, until the order came from Cadorna to retreat beyond the Tagliamento. They carried out irreproachably the difficult retirement across the Isonzo gorge and out of the hills ; but as they proceeded over the plain, hustled by the victorious enemy pouring down on their flank from Cividale, they were gradually infected by the sense that all was lost. Mainly between Udine and the Tagliamento, they gave way at length to the war-weariness which had so long been at strife

with their valour and patriotism, flung away their rifles wholesale, and passed round the word, "Andiamo a casa" ("We're going home"). The last scenes of the Second Army were a sad falling from what the same men had shown themselves two months before.

The third and largest category of all consisted of the troops who did their duty throughout. Most of, though not quite all, the Third Army from the Carso, and the Fifth, First, and Fourth Armies on the Cadore and Trentino fronts, saved Italy by holding fast where required, and retreating in order where necessary, so that the shorter line was successfully established in the early days of November. Many heroic feats of individual companies, regiments, and divisions illumined the worst hours of the Retreat. And some of the finest of these were performed by units of the Second Army itself, both in the mountain region of Matajur above Caporetto, and in the plain of Udine.

I may be regarded as partial, but I believe that the Second Army, though it can scarcely complain if it has been made to bear the sins of the nation, was not really a worse army than any other, except for the untried and undesirable elements whom the authorities had carelessly thrust into Caporetto that autumn. The men at Plava and Gorizia had up till then performed the most

brilliant and sustained feats of arms done by any part of the Italian forces, and if at last they gave way worse than the others, that was only in proportion to their geographical propinquity to the break-through on their flank and rear. Elements in the Third Army suffered the same disintegration for the same reason. The half-million men of whom the Second Army was composed must not be condemned in a mass, nor their previous achievements forgotten. None the less the now established tradition that the Duke of Aosta's Third Army saved the situation by its superior discipline in the retreat from the Carso and by turning to bay behind the Piave, represents an essential truth.

Such in the main were the phenomena; but their causes are a subject far more diffused and obscure, on which I can only aspire to throw some feeble lights from my personal experience and observation.

Of the positive treachery at Caporetto itself I can say little, because I was not there, and the cars of our Unit had been withdrawn from that zone before the regiments in fault were sent up. It is common knowledge that the ranks of these regiments were filled up with several thousands of the munition workers who had taken part in the recent Turin revolt. To concentrate these men at Caporetto as a punishment was not a very fortunate

inspiration. I know from what I have been told by those who were in Caporetto in the last weeks before the disaster, that the soldiers made no secret of their intentions, and that many of their officers lived in fear of their own men, locking themselves up carefully at night. Indeed, certain of these troops refused to accept the usual gifts distributed by patriotic agencies among the men at the front, grounding their refusal on the fact that they regarded themselves as no longer in service. This refusal, as I know, gravely alarmed certain persons in Venice, and was, therefore, probably known in other quarters up and down Italy. But since there had been so little treachery in the Italian army heretofore, and since Caporetto was regarded as a quiet part of the line, the responsible authorities left matters alone. Possibly the too great isolation in which the Comando Supremo was said to live under General Cadorna's *régime* is partly responsible for the failure to scent the smoke before the fire. If so, that General, to whom Italy and the Allies owe so much, has dearly paid for the defects of his qualities.

With regard to the bulk of the Second Army, I can speak at first hand of the men who had hitherto borne the burden and heat of the day, but who, after the retreat had been ordered, were gradually infected by

the cry of "Andiamo a casa." I had had for more than two years the opportunity to hear their point of view and to observe their psychology.

Let us take the case of an imaginary "Giuseppe," and try to reconstruct in his person a type of the *povero fante*. Giuseppe comes from a farm in the Apennines, where, in the summer of 1915, he left a wife and five small children. His simple and intensely human thoughts and affections are all centred upon them, and upon his farm and a village made up of persons like himself. Outside that circle he has no experience, no knowledge, nor much interest in life beyond a good-natured but uninstructed curiosity in whatever may be going on under his eyes. Of politics he knows nothing. No one has attempted to instruct him in them, except the priest, who told him not to vote because the State was wicked, and the Socialist, who exhorted him to seize the land. He is silently suspicious, both of priest and of Socialist, as he is of every one pretending to authority. But their combined exhortations can have done little to fortify his sense of patriotism or of civic duty, which must in his case be instinctive, since they have never been inculcated. He has, indeed, heard of Garibaldi, and knows that the Austrians are *brutte bestie*. If he comes from the Veneto, local traditions on

the latter point are more definite, and patriotism proportionally more vivid. Giuseppe can read, which is more than can be said of a quarter of his regiment, chiefly coming from the south.* But he sets little store by the newspapers—they do not talk about things that interest him; besides, he regards them as being part of the system of authority, and, therefore, their statements are to be regarded with the respectful scepticism that he accords to all things official.

Between battles there is little drill, training, or discipline. The life of the soldier seems to Giuseppe dull and purposeless. His officers, who expose themselves well in battle, are patriotic, and know all the reasons for the war, but they live by themselves. Sometimes the Colonel reads the regiment a manifesto about the Italian eagle perching on the highest summit of the Alps, but some of Giuseppe's companions say under their breaths, "Porca Madonna! Vogliamo andare a casa." The officers are not unpopular and never cruel, but they do not look after Giuseppe very much. There once were two young *sotto-tenenti* who tried to prevent the sergeants taking all the good food; they succeeded

* I remember, when I found two soldiers who were drawing water at a forbidden source just under a large prohibitory notice, saying to them, "Can't you read?" and being effectively silenced by the quiet reply, "No, we can't."

for a week, and then things went on as before. The food that reaches Giuseppe is much less good and plentiful than it was. The trenches are very wet and cold when they are not very hot, and they are always terribly dull; several times he has been left in them two months on end by some Staff muddle about changing battalions. And even when he is *in riposo* life is wet, dirty, and dull. It is seldom one is near a *casa del soldato*. But "*Pazienza*," Giuseppe says; that is his great peasant virtue, on which the ungrateful State is built.

Giuseppe did not make the war: it was not made in the village; the crowds in the town made it that night in May when they marched to the Syndic's with the flags. But when they called up Giuseppe, he said to his wife, "*Pazienza*," and went cheerfully. His brother, who had been in the town that night and heard the speeches, said Italia needed them; so they went. His brother died of cholera under Sabotino that winter.

There are several Socialists in the regiment who conduct most of the discussions. Some of them are patriots, but Aristodemo talks them all down. Giuseppe does not understand all that Aristodemo says; it is vague, distant talk coming from the world outside his village. But it seems to have some relation to things

that are real to him; the chief of these are his wife's letters, saying that prices are so high that she can no longer feed the children on the separation allowance. She also writes that the priest says the Pope has declared there will be peace in a month, but that the chemist says they must go on fighting for another three months and then they will win. Giuseppe has just come off San Gabriele, and knows they will not win in three months. Half the regiment was killed there. He doubts if they will ever win at all. Russia has given in: he understands that much about world politics; also that the Inglesi are very stubborn. Aristodemo says the Russians are sensible fellows. *Porca miseria!* he says, what are we doing shivering and starving and dying here to win these barren mountains where no one lives at all except a few barbarians who cannot even talk Italian? What are we fighting for? The Inglesi pay our masters to go on with the war, says Aristodemo, but none of it comes our way, except fivepence a day in the front line and threepence behind! Giuseppe has had two leaves of ten days each since he joined in 1915, and each time he went back his wife was more depressed and thinner, and every one in the village had turned against the war except the chemist—but he is always against the priest anyhow.

Oh yes, says Aristodemo, the Russians have got liberty, and so they have all gone home to their farms, and taken the land into the bargain! They have had a revolution, and so should we. Well, but Giuseppe has twice seen the King in the line, and every one in the regiment agrees that he is not *imboscato*, and that his grandfather chased the Austrians out of Italy. But then, says Aristodemo, there are plenty of others who are *imboscati*. All the "great guns," he says, keep their sons and nephews *imboscati;* they sit in the *retrovie*, eating beefsteak, and give us poor soldiers in the trenches dry chestnuts. Giuseppe laughs at that, and sings a song about it, the forbidden song. It has many verses that every one knows, and Aristodemo is always writing new ones. One verse says :—

> "A Cividale e Udine ci sono imboscati;
> Hanno le scarpe lucide e capelli profumati."
> ("At Cividale and Udine the *embuchés* live.
> They have shining boots and perfumed hair.")

The officers first try to stop the song. But it bores them to be disobliging, so they soon laugh, and shrug their shoulders when they hear it begin.

Giuseppe has been two and a half years away from home, and here is a third winter coming on. When he gets away from Aristodemo he wishes he could talk

about things to the young sub-lieutenant as he did one day last year, when the sub-lieutenant made it all so clear to him, and talked about Italia. But now the sub-lieutenant has gone. His arm was blown right off him on that accursed mountain, and he just said, "Viva l'Italia!" and then his skin grew like wax. But Giuseppe carried him away so that the *brutte bestie* never got him.

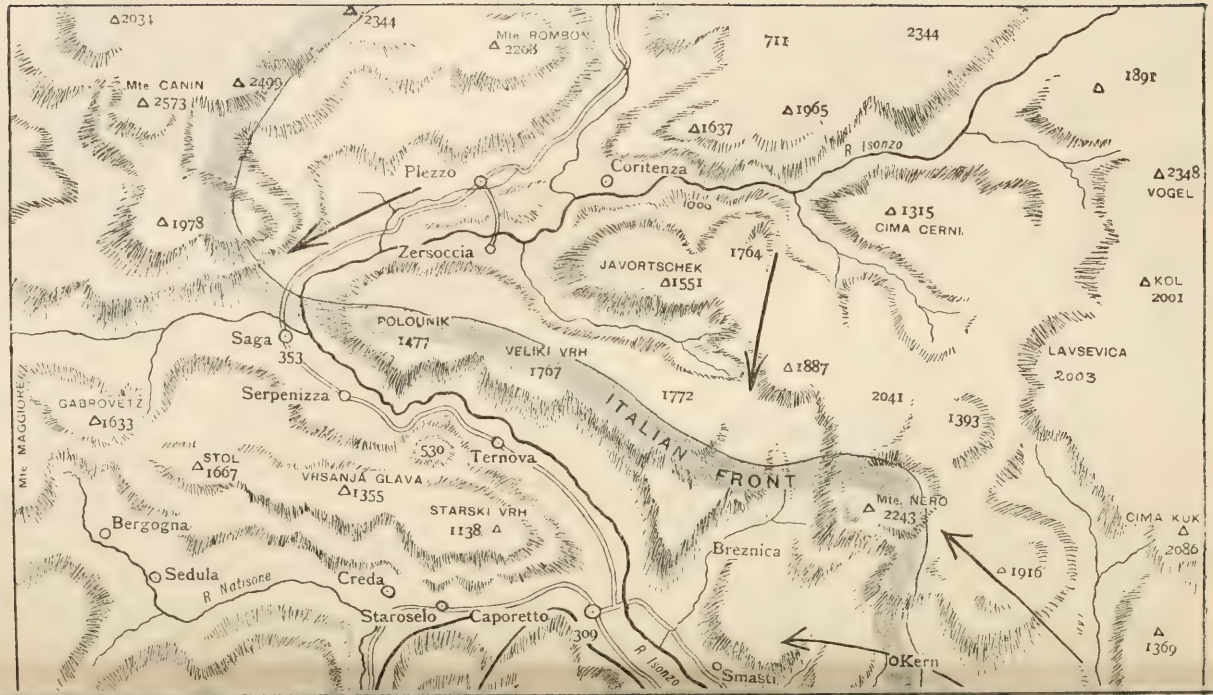
On the top of all this came the news of Caporetto, and Cadorna's order to retreat. So they trudged off, sad at first that it had all come to nothing, and sad to leave behind so many dead comrades on those barren hills—above all, the two sub-lieutenants, who would mind so much if they knew. But as they went on they began to feel they were going home. The roads in the plain were so crowded that they soon began to pass the artillery and cars standing blocked in rows. It was raining like ruin. No one gave orders or made them keep rank. They just splashed on, getting more and more like a mob, in the mood of children coming back from school. "Andiamo a casa," they said. Evidently Cadorna had given it up, and the war was over. As there is going to be peace now, said Aristodemo, let us throw away our rifles, and then no fool of an officer can turn us back to fight when it is no use. Well, says Giuseppe,

the rifles are very heavy, and we have not eaten for two days. There is an Inglese; let us ask him what he thinks about the war now! Giuseppe asks him, not unkindly, and the Englishman smiles in a sickly way, meant to be at once pleasant and inscrutable. He feels that he is being chaffed in the way that he used to be chaffed when his side lost the general election at home, and he has to try and smile as he used to then.

To me the thing that needs explaining is not why the Retreat occurred, but why it did not occur long before, and how the Italian army and nation rallied and reconstituted their *moral*, and imposed on themselves a new and better discipline. These peasant soldiers were neither educated up to understanding the objects and ideals of the war like the English and American soldier, nor terrorized like the soldier in the enemy ranks. It was instinctive patriotism, natural courage, and the peasants' stamina and patience that enabled the Italian to put up so long with such conditions of life, and to endure war losses of 460,000 dead in a population only half the white population of the British Empire. The Italians are magnificent material, and if only they were given good education, they would respond splendidly in peace as in war to the requirements of their age and their country.

Until midsummer, 1917, our Unit had a small station of cars at Caporetto. We regarded the happy valley as a health resort, where drivers who had had a particularly severe time at Plava or Gorizia could serve a turn under peace conditions. The atmosphere of the place was idyllic, protected as it was by great Monte Nero, safe in the hands of the Alpini. Behind that rampart the Isonzo valley opened out broad and green to Tolmino, where, indeed, the Austrians lay, but very quietly. A shell was the rarest of events, and Caporetto roofs were intact. The statue of a local Austrian poet looked out on the square, where life, civil and military, went on as in the age of gold. There, beside our garage, was the school where some sympathetic Italian officers taught the little Slovene children and kept them happy little mortals, whom it was a joy to see at work or play.

Such were the ideas that the word "Caporetto" conjured up in my mind in those days, and such, it seems, *mutatis mutandis*, were the ideas entertained of it by the Italian Supreme Command when the blow fell. A combination of circumstances marked it out to the genius of Ludendorff as the place for the German attack. A magnificent road, and a railway alongside it which the Italians had just finished, led down a gorge through the


Mte CANIN
Mte ROMBON
Plezzo
Coritenza
Zersoccia
Saga
Serpenizza
POLOUNIK
VELIKI VRH
JAVORTSCHEK
CIMA CERNI.
VOGEL
KOL
LAVSEVICA
GABROVETZ
STOL
VRSANJA GLAVA
STARSKI VRH
Ternova
ITALIAN FRONT
Mte. NERO
CIMA KUK
Bergogna
Sedula
Creda
Staroselo
Caporetto
Breznica
Smasti
Kern
R. Isonzo
R. Natisone
Mte MAGGIORE

MAP X.—The Austro-German Break-through at Caporetto, October 1917.

hills from Caporetto to Cividale, and if once the Austro-Germans could debouch on Cividale they had turned the flank and rear of all the armies on the Isonzo front. It was true that Monte Nero could not be taken by assault, but if low-lying Caporetto was captured behind it, the Alpini on the great mountain could be isolated and masked while the race to the plain went on. Caporetto could be attacked from Plezzo and from Tolmino, down and up the course of the Isonzo. The Monte Nero positions were really too high up to protect the town at their feet. These operations were rendered the easier by the dangerously sharp angle here formed by the Italian line. This angle was threatened by the Austrians' bridgehead at Santa Lucia, which their successful defence of Lom in the last days of August had still left in their hands.* And now they were in correspondence with the disaffected regiments sent up to guard these vital but little regarded positions. Everything pointed to this as the place for the attack by von Below's six German divisions, employing Ludendorff's new tactics of "infiltration," with which successful experiments had already been made on the Russian front in September.

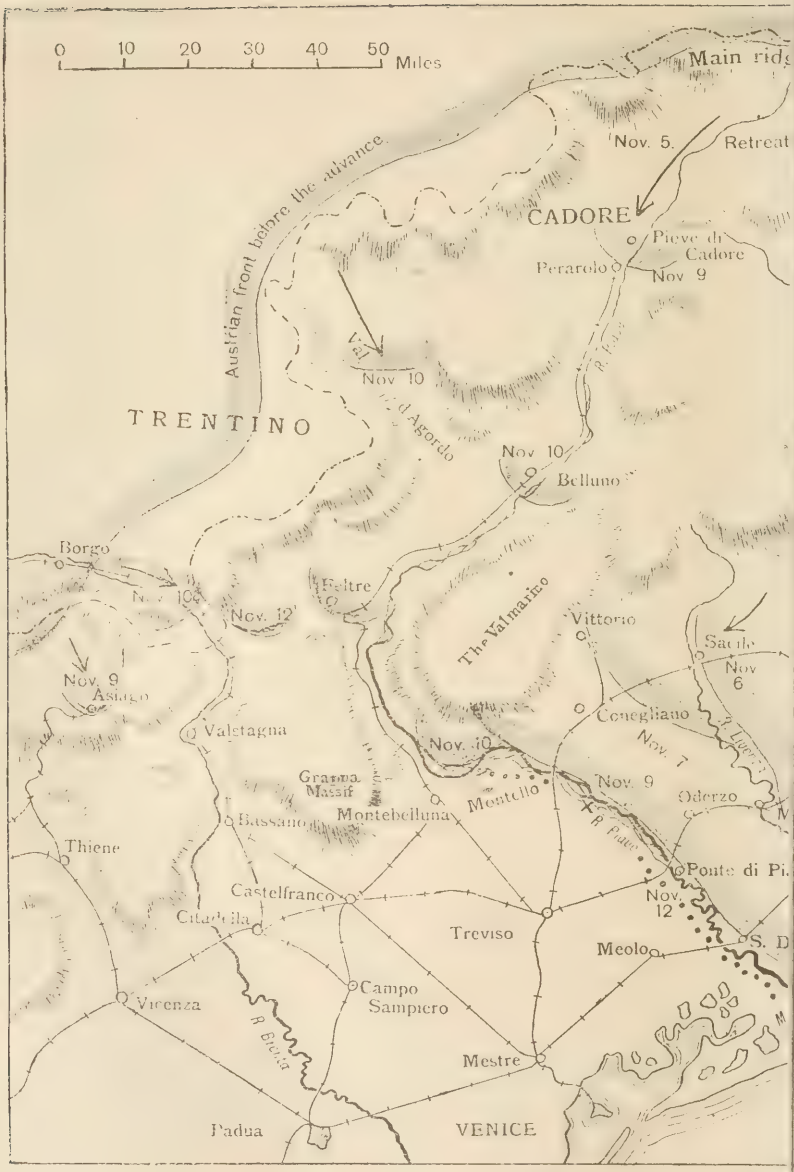
On these lines the stroke was played on October 24,

* See page 142.

1917, with complete success.* The pace and course of the Austro-German advance after Cadorna had given the general order to retreat can be traced on Map XI. Not only did the debouchment into the plain at Cividale compel the rapid retirement of the Gorizia and Carso armies, but as the right wing of the victorious advance swept along the northern edge of the plain, closing up one valley's mouth after another, they dictated an ever-hastier evacuation of the Carnic, Cadore, and Feltre Alps by the Fourth Italian Army. Alpini officers have described to me their misery at having to abandon, through no fault of their own or of the men under them, not only their guns but all the marvellous positions in the highest Alps which it had been for two years past their pride to guard and perfect for Italy. Many of the retreating columns fought magnificent rearguard actions, attacking and thrusting back the enemy from points which imperilled the retreat of other units in the vast and difficult area of evacuation.

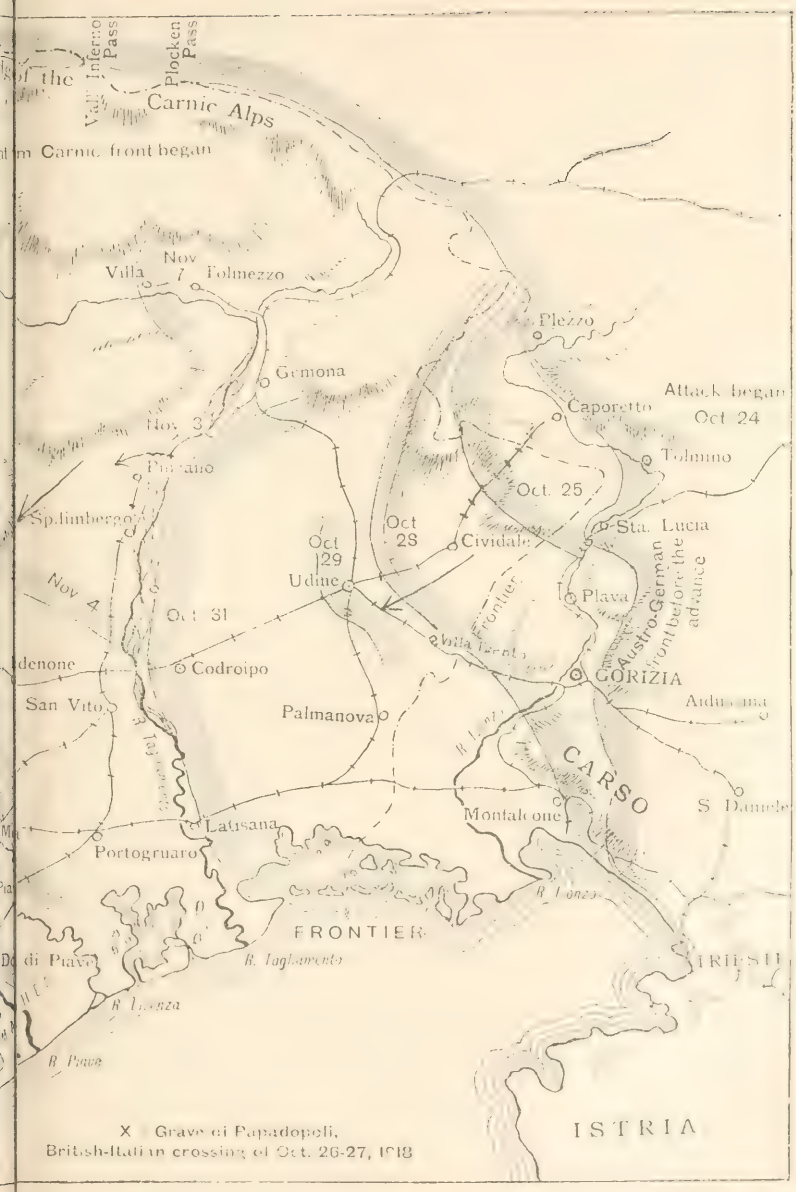
After a heavy bombardment at Ravne, in which another of our cars was destroyed, our men evacuated the

* On that day a station of the 2nd B.R.C. Unit, who had succeeded us at Caporetto, had one driver wounded and two cars destroyed in the courtyard where our cars used to stand so peacefully in old days, and where the school used to be.



MAP XI.—Stages of Ener

(The dates printed on the map refer to 1917. The dotted line marks t



Advance after Caporetto.

(Furthest Austrian advance across the Piave in the battle of June 1918.)

last of the wounded off the Bainsizza in the difficult and orderly retreat which the army effected out of that dangerous salient. On the evening of October 27th they finally left behind our old scenes of Plava and Quisca, after assisting our friend Professor Baldo Rossi of the Città di Milano surgery to get away not only his patients, but his invaluable material.*

All this had been done before I arrived back from English leave on the morning of October 27th. That night the last of our cars, under Philip Baker's command, left Gorizia when the Italians evacuated the scenes of so much glory. As we left the house in the chestnut grove, where we had been such a happy family for more than a year past, with the silent scurry of retreat in all the familiar lanes around, I certainly never expected to see the place again. Yet in twelve months and a few days I was going over the old house once more with Geoffrey Young, and laughing to find a German war-loan poster on our own notice board.

That same evening (October 27th) I had received orders to evacuate Villa Trento and replant the hospital

* As a testimony to the help of the Unit on this and other occasions the Croce Rossa Italiana conferred the rather unusual honour of the silver medal of its society on F. G. Penman, the driver in charge of our ambulances on the Bainsizza after September 11th, when Baker went to Gorizia.

at Conegliano. But it was now too late to save the material, and only just in time to save the personnel. Our good friend Colonel Morino, now medical chief of the Second Army, had honoured Dr. Brock and the workers of our hospital by choosing it as one of the last to function in that zone after the neighbouring hospitals had had orders to retire. We took in all the wounded who came in these last days, and evacuated them all. But we were left on the night of October 27th with nothing but our own ambulances, and not all of them, to save the material of the hospital, the garage, and all that the Unit had in the world, with only a few hours to do it in upon the blocked roads before the enemy cut in from the north. We had sent off the nurses that evening in two ambulances to make sure of their escape. But since most of our drivers were arriving at Villa Trento exhausted by several consecutive days and nights of work on the Bainsizza and in Gorizia, we determined to spend a last night in the old home, so that they could snatch a few hours' sleep before the final departure for a very unknown destination.

But Baker and I were not easy about the situation, and when, at three o'clock in the morning, a neighbouring small-arms munition dump (or so we supposed) began going off with a rattle exactly like that of machine

guns, the noise was so horribly suggestive that, although we guessed its real cause, we roused the dozing drivers and started the column which had been loaded up overnight with as much as the cars were capable of carrying. So we left Villa Trento in the dark, though not, as we then feared, for ever.

Outside the Villa gates, in the main road from Cormons to Udine, we worked our way into the column of retreat, that was at first moving a few yards at a time, but soon came to an absolute standstill for the rest of the night. The column was stretching all the way on to Udine, and beyond Udine, through Codroipo to the Tagliamento. We found that there was a tacit understanding on the retreat that no one moved at all for half the night, because all the horses and most of the drivers went to sleep. At dawn they woke up, and the irregular serpent jogged on again by fits and starts, here a little, and there a little. There was absolutely no road management. I did not see a single Carabiniere on the road between the Isonzo and the Tagliamento, not even in the streets of Udine. The only officer whom I saw attempting at one place to direct the traffic was doing just the wrong thing—namely, forbidding the motor vehicles to pass the horse vehicles, which they could not infrequently have done without causing confusion, since no

one was trying to come back against the tide, and everything, therefore, was going the same way on the broad road. But the slowest set the pace, even when there was not a complete standstill. Meanwhile thousands of farm carts, bearing the fugitive peasantry and their household goods, joined the procession of military retreat, adding greatly to the congestion. The entire absence of traffic control, either general or detailed, must, I think, have doubled the number of cannon, lorries, and carts that fell into the enemy's hands. Every one did that which was right in his own eyes; but, fortunately, being Italians, they were a good-natured crowd, and although most of them were starving, and all discipline had disappeared, there was neither violence nor fear of it.

Under these conditions the only thing to be done was to get off the main road and let the cars work round singly or in small convoys by the by-roads and strike in again near Codroipo to cross the Tagliamento bridge. As it turned out, our cars that took the southern routes fared badly, getting into crowds as immovable as those on the main road itself, so that finally more than a dozen had to be abandoned before the approach of the enemy. But those of us who chanced to take the northern circuit found clear by-roads on the other side of Udine, and

reached the Tagliamento bridge the same evening (October 28th), nearly a day ahead not only of the cars that had started with us from Villa Trento, but of the nurses who had left eight and twelve hours before.

Passing through Udine at midday on the 28th, I found all sign of authority had already disappeared from the interior of the town. No one pretending to give orders was visible on the streets, and any one who wished was looting. We had scarcely got outside the western gate when the same noise that had decided our departure from Villa Trento broke out on the other side of the town. Again I felt sure that it was a small-arms munition dump being let off, but the Italians in charge of the cannon amid which our cars were now jammed held other views. And indeed I subsequently learned that they were right in their opinion ; an advanced party of the enemy had pushed from Cividale on Udine, and were scrapping with the Arditi at the other end of the town. As we looked back and wondered what the noise meant, a German aeroplane, like a vulture on the corpse, swooped down low over the roofs, firing as it dived. But the Arditi held their ground, and Udine did not fall till next day.

As the vehicles in front of us had now been many of

them deserted, it was impossible for us to move another yard down the main road from Udine to Codroipo. Our small convoy of six cars perforce turned off the road by the only way we could move, across the open fields to the north. A single broad ditch would have imprisoned us, but we had the luck to get through on to by-roads which were comparatively clear for twenty miles, and brought us out on to the main road again, beyond the hopeless block in Codroipo, close up to the Tagliamento bridge itself.

That evening (October 28th) our little party crossed the bridge as dusk fell. On that wet Beresina day the mile-long wooden bridge spanned a torrent which spread its tossing waves from shore to shore. The unwonted fury of the Alpine floods gave us poor fugitives the welcome sense that once across we were in safety, even though we looked in vain for any sign of the preparations for permanent defence of the Tagliamento, upon which we had hitherto counted. For the time being, the flood seemed security enough.

The rain fell steadily, increasing the physical misery and mental depression of retreat. But it saved Italy, perhaps, from destruction, by impeding the pursuit and preventing the full use of aeroplanes. The Italians had no sufficient means at hand to combat aircraft, and a vigorous

attack might have rendered impossible the passage of the crowded and narrow bridge, as well as of the Latisana bridge farther south over which the Third Army was escaping. In the pursuit of the Austrians a year later over the same roads, our side found it difficult enough to keep up the pace, with the line of communications ever lengthening; but then at least we were blessed with a month of perfect weather and hard ground. Indeed, when I saw the Codroipo bridge again early in November 1918 the scene and the circumstances were very different. The winter sun was gaily shining on the distant circle of the Alps and Monte Nero's ledge of snow; the river bed was stone dry, white shingle a mile broad; the bridge that had borne the weight of so much misery had disappeared, burnt to the ground, and cheerful American "doughboys," who knew not the tragic meanings that the place had to us Europeans, were marching over dry-shod to help garner the fruits of Austria's irreversible "Caporetto."

But on the evening of October 28, 1917, the task was to save the present, not to spin day-dreams about the future. Once we reached the farther shore of the Tagliamento we set foot on a more hopeful and active world, where officers and Carabinieri were sorting out the men as they arrived over the bridge, and orders were

being given and obeyed. That night we reached Pordenone, twenty kilometres farther on, where we had agreed that our numerous small convoys and isolated cars should meet. There I found Dr. Brock, who had already secured the villa for our hospital at Conegliano. But it was now highly doubtful whether we should ever have a hospital there or elsewhere. I spent a wet and anxious night in the public square at Pordenone watching for arrivals, but no one came. At morning I was faced by the ugly fact that the nurses, who had started in two parties nine and six hours before us from Villa Trento, had not yet arrived. And among the persons still unaccounted for was Geoffrey Young on crutches, who, together with the devoted Matron, Miss Power, had left Villa Trento with the last of us. There could be no question of driving back to the bridge against the throng, so I set off to walk.

Before I reached the bridge I had the relief of my life. I met first the Matron and Young, and then half the nurses and sure news of the other half. They had all been obliged to abandon their cars in the block and walk. How Young had come so many miles without a car in his then condition only he and those who helped him through can tell. Next year he got an artificial leg fitted by the famous orthopædist, Professor Putti of

Bologna, and rejoined us on the Piave in time for the battle in June.

One party of the nurses had been accompanied and aided in the worst part of their retreat by Colonel Hayley of the British batteries, who, reduced like them to pedestrianism, had fallen in with them by the way, and shown them the same friendliness that all the officers of the British batteries had always shown to the Croce Rossa Britannica. The Red Cross was able to repay their kindness, for it was owing to the indefatigable work of some cars of Mr. Alexander's Third B.R.C. Unit, attached to the batteries on their retreat from the Carso by the Latisana bridge, that no British sick or wounded fell into the hands of the enemy. These services General Hamilton recognized in a generous letter.

All the British guns were got away, though they started late off the Carso. Heaven knows how it was done. The English are wonderful in misfortune. Not a man or woman in the retreat, whether British army or B.R.C., but rose to the height of the occasion. Ours was not a grumbling Unit, as English people go, but it was the only week in the war when no one grumbled about anything. Yet, Heaven knows what they had to put up with.

We gathered our remnants together as they came in to Pordenone—half our cars, but fortunately all our men

—and thence drove straight on to Padua. To stop at Conegliano was out of the question, even if we had had material for a hospital, for the line of the Piave was the utmost that any one now proposed to hold. And, indeed, the days of our hospital work were numbered, for we had lost even the little that we had taken from Villa Trento in the cars that had been abandoned. Only some of our garage plant was left us. So the ladies, who for two years had done such magnificent work for Italy, went back to England from Padua.

One scene at Padua stays in my mind's eye. In the Piazza Garibaldi stands the statue of the liberator, looking down with his face of simple faith and valour. In front of his pedestal, hour after hour, day after day, passed the files of the dejected and unarmed, his countrymen. It was impossible not to think him alive and watching. One almost heard his voice upbraiding them. In all the wonderful changes and chances of the year that followed, that graven image, hand on sword hilt, seemed to watch and know. After the end of the June battle that saved Italy and the cause of freedom, I saw the crowd in front of him cheering the King as he drove by, a victor. And once more, on the night of the armistice that ended Austria, the Paduans set between Garibaldi's arms the staff of the flag he loved.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Rally, November–December 1917—High Alpine warfare, 1918—The June battle on the Piave.

IN the first days of November 1917 the Second Army disappeared altogether from the line. But the front was becoming daily so much shorter by the continuous withdrawal towards Italy's " bottle-neck " of the Piave and Asiago (see Map XI., pages 178–9) that the Fourth Army from the north and Third Army from the south were able to link hands across the gap. Day by day the Duke of Aosta's Third Army fought rear-guard actions in the plain, now on the Tagliamento, now on the Livenza, and finally stood firm behind the Piave, where the enemy's inability to bring up heavy cannon quickly over the long bridgeless roads compensated for the fact that the Italians had lost so many of theirs which it would at best take weeks and months to replace.

It was already clear that the army would make a

fight for it, if the country behind would pluck up courage. All turned on that "tremendous *if*." Now, in the souls of four-and-thirty millions from the Alps to Sicily, a decisive battle was waged in the secular conflict between the persistent materialism and the no less persistent idealism of the Italian nature. The very existence of the idealist principle in the common life of the race was threatened, and to some seemed already doomed. Italy, having striven for a hundred years to be a great and free country with traditions and memories of her own making, had not, it seemed, the necessary staying power. Was she, after all, fit only to be a "museum, an inn, a summer resort" for German "honeymoon couples," "a delightful market for buying and selling, fraud and barter," as in the days before Mazzini? Had the fathers of the *Risorgimento* been mere sentimentalists, who tried to make the land of their dreams out of earthen clay? Had the true decision been, not in 1860, but in 1849, if only they had had the sense to accept it? Or had they perchance been right after all, those great ones of old, with that large faith of theirs? The world would soon know.

By a fortunate indiscretion Cadorna, in his first rage at the news from Caporetto, had issued a *communiqué* telling the truth about the betrayal, and cursing the

regiments who had opened Italy's house-door to the foe. The first draft was hastily suppressed and re-issued in a modified form; but not before enough people had seen the original to send it flying by old Rumour's post over the length and breadth of Italy. It brought to their senses many blind and weak-kneed patriots. Suddenly, as by a flash of lightning, men and women in Turin and Florence, and in the remotest villages of north and south, saw what they had done by their murmurings, their cryings for peace when there was no peace, their sympathy with deserters, their discouraging letters to the front. Even in Clerical circles in Rome fashionable ladies admitted that "the thing had gone too far." The over-practical pacifists of Caporetto, instead of being in favour with the nation whom they had striven to release from the obligations of further self-defence, were everywhere cursed as traitors. Heaven knows there is no need to curse them any more now. They had wrought better than they intended. And in the last twelve months 100,000 Italian prisoners have perished of want in Austria-Hungary! If any of those who went over at Caporetto dreamed of finding "comrades" among the Austrians, they had been tragically deceived.

The better elements in Italy seized the lead, and

kept it until the war was won. Orlando, though he had been accused of too lax a tolerance of the enemy propaganda during his Ministership of the Interior, now succeeded to the Premiership, and initiated proper measures on the "home front." Hitherto, though the press had been generally sound, the other methods of propaganda had been worked more effectively by the enemy's party than by the patriots. From henceforth all that was changed. There was a simultaneous improvement in governmental methods and in the general trend of public opinion, nor is it easy to say which was the cart and which the horse.

One of the most remarkable forms in which the new spirit of the nation clothed itself was the Propaganda of the Mutilated. On October 28th, when Cadorna's original *communiqué* was first bruited in the streets of Milan, nine maimed officers met in that city, which is ever the hearth of Italy's flame, and, sitting round the bed of Lieutenant Count Paulucci, who had been paralyzed by a wound on the Carso, decided how best, out of their physical infirmities, they might derive strength for their country's need. They formed themselves into a Committee of Propaganda, and wired that day to the Comando Supremo for leave to begin their campaign. Leave was granted, and the work sped. Their numbers

were increased, and among the privates and officers who had lost eyes and limbs were found men with the strange power of the Italian revivalist preachers of old time, of Savonarola and of Ugo Bassi. In one industrial village in the Milanese, the Mayor and population refused the missionaries a hearing; but the paralyzed Lieutenant Paulucci, held up on a table by his soldier friend, began to speak, and in an hour had converted them all, and drove off amid a frantic ovation. But the most effective speaker was said to be a blind private. Their propaganda was also carried on in the army itself.*

As the remnants of the Second Army slunk away into Lombardy along the by-lanes of western Venetia, one saw by their bearing that they knew they had made a great mistake. More and more one experienced, along the whole line of towns and villages from Mantua to Treviso, that the heart of the population was sound. The fear of the coming of the "Tedeschi" bound every one together in a common bond of brotherhood, to which the Italians know how to give such sympathetic expression in the contact of everyday life. To be in English uniform was to be sure of the kindest reception everywhere in those dark days. And the mere sight of

* For further details, see the *Anglo-Italian Review*, October 1918, pp. 169–173.

the market-towns of the Veneto, with their fourteenth-century brick walls of defence, and their dark, mysterious colonnades along the ancient streets, brought comfort to the heart. It was impossible to believe that such beauty would be given over to the Vandals. So, too, with the rich fields of the plain and the large threshing-floors of the farms where we parked our cars. Surely men would fight to defend this land of theirs, so populous and so beautiful, whatever doubts the more ignorant may have had as to the purpose of the war on the barren and barbarous heights beyond the Isonzo. The insight that we obtained into the prosperous life of the villages of the great plain during our sojourn near Mantua made us understand better the value of the life men lived in Italy and of all that was at stake.

We had lost half our ambulances, and those that were left were in no condition for fresh service till they had been overhauled. We had never been *in riposo* since our arrival in September 1915, for we had never gone back with any of the successive Italian divisions, but remained always in the front-line service.* But now that the Second Army, which we had served,

* This had only been rendered possible by the constant work of our mechanics under the Mechanical Officer, Mr. G. C. Marriage. We did all our own repairs in the garage at Villa Trento.

was going altogether out of the line, we took the opportunity to have three weeks' repose near Mantua to reconstitute the Unit and repair the cars, before going up to the Piave again to take service under the Third Army.

And so it came about that I saw a British army, the first that ever entered the Lombard plain, march out of Isabella d'Este's fortress across Vergil's lake. The dull anxiety that overhung the brightest moments of that November month seemed lifted as they marched by. Looking on such men, it seemed impossible to think we could be beaten. What perfection of equipment, of drill, of discipline, and yet what lively suppleness of individual will in every man. The kitchen fires burning as they marched, the glossy-coated horses and shining harness, even the hard-won brilliance of the objurgated buttons were not wasted in that march through Italy. I believe the Italians, civil and military, were cheered at the sight as I was cheered ; and confidence was what we needed then. The fall of Jerusalem came in usefully enough. Certainly the reception of the British troops all along the route was splendid. Many of them marched with gifts of flowers and Italian flags stuck in their rifles, determined to please and to be pleased. But since they had to detrain at Mantua and march all

the way to the Piave, it was only on December 4th that they got into line on the Montello. The French, being nearer at the first call, had appeared in the northern area some time before.

Italy was not deserted by her Allies. Caporetto was a blow for Little-Westerners in France and England. Of these Lloyd George had never been one, nor was he the man to let the grass grow under his feet in time of crisis. As early as November 5th Caporetto gave birth to the conference of Rapallo, where the leaders of England, France, and Italy laid down the lines of unity of front which developed into the united granary, the united exchequer, and the united command which, with America as partner, won the war in a year.

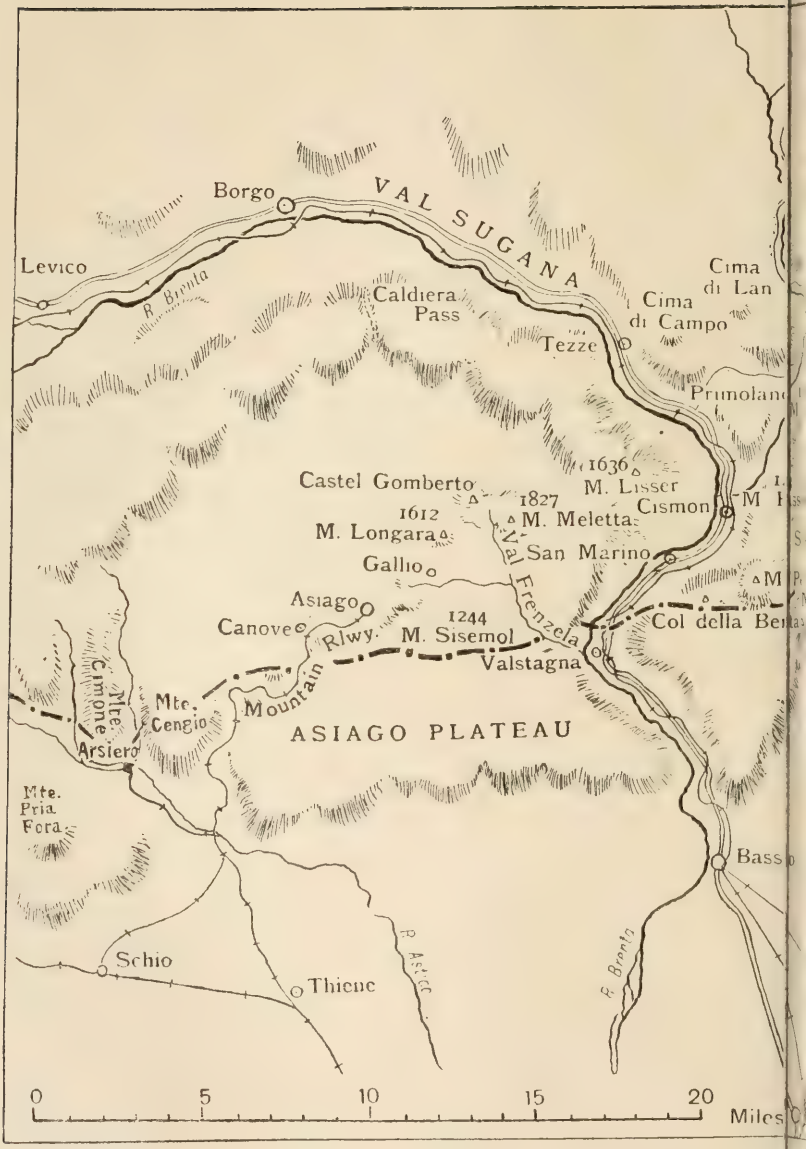
One of England's best loans to Italy was General Plumer. All the influence of his strong character was steadily cast for holding the Piave line at all risks, because the risks involved in further retreat were greater still. Yet the proposition that the Piave could be held as the final line was a paradox to most Italians and Englishmen early in November, and by no means a certainty in December. Only gradually, day by day, the feelings of permanence and security grew up along the front, as day by day the Italians resisted the repeated and furious assaults of the Austrians at point after point

of the mountain positions, from Asiago round by Grappa to the plain. Without the protection of trenches, the lads of seventeen and eighteen, brought up untrained from the depots, saved their country again and again. Only three miles more, and the enemy would have stood on the top of the great wall of mountain that falls sheer into the plain, the Piave barrier would have been turned, and Venice lost.

We returned to service on the Piave on November 21st. The fighting there was over, and there was little doing except diligent drilling, the building up of the new spirit, and the construction of line behind line of defences between Treviso and the river. But what would all this be worth if the hills were to be turned behind us? And when was the snow coming? Morning after morning we raised our eyes to the hills in hopes of seeing the seasonable cloak of white, long overdue—but in vain. It was lovely weather, fresh and sunny, restorative to the *moral* and cheerfulness of the army, but snow it would not. It was not the snow that saved Italy, but the valour of her sons.

By the end of January 1918 the Austrian attempt to break into Italy had been definitely defeated and the line was established where it remained, with very slight

modifications, down to the end of October. Until that final settling of accounts with Austria, General Diaz undertook no large offensive; and as the Austrians only once attacked him, in the famous week of the June battle, the year 1918 was very peaceful in Italy as compared to France, and as compared to any one of the other three years of the Italian war. That the cautious policy of Diaz and Badoglio, now his Chief of Staff, was right in the main cannot be seriously questioned, though there may be differences as to detail and degree. Caution achieved not only survival, which for long was highly uncertain, but the most complete of victories. It would have been folly for the Italians to attack before the autumn, and it was no part of the Allied plan. The Austrians, no longer having the Russians to contend with, were superior in the number of divisions, and above all in the strength of positions, for everywhere to the east of Pasubio they were far over the watershed, on heights dominating the Italian lines. The Austrian army could not, therefore, have been defeated until its *moral* had been disintegrated by political and economic action. And an unsuccessful attack might have reacted most unfavourably on the Italian *moral*, which was being so carefully nursed after its almost fatal illness.



MAP XII.—Approximate Line o

See Map XI. for

(During the retreat in November 1917 the Austrians had advanced aga
shown on M

Italian and Allied Defence, 1918.

ntinuation to sea.

in the Arsiero and Asiago regions beyond the line of end of June 1916,
IV. above.)

Nevertheless it was an unavoidable minor misfortune, or so I always felt it to be, that the year when there were a large number of English and French on the Italian front was the year when things there were so quiet. The Allies inevitably came to think of the Italian front as a "peace front," because they never saw what a few of us had seen—the repeated and stubborn Italian offensives of 1915, 1916, and 1917. English attention was directed to Italy principally during the year when it was her wise policy to wait and recuperate. Hence it surprised some people, though it did not surprise me, to learn that the Italians killed in the war were as numerous as the British, in proportion to the size of Italy's population.*

While three British and three French divisions took their share in strengthening the Italian line on the Piave and Asiago, the Americans, who had no troops at hand, devoted themselves with characteristic energy, publicity, and largeness of scope, to fortifying the "home front." The American Red Cross did fine ambulance work at the front; but it did not confine itself to the sick and wounded there, or even to the refugees, but also pursued an intensive cultivation of the towns and villages of the north, centre, and south, combating want and

* See p. 235 below. The wounded were fewer in proportion.

discontent, the enemy garrison which always threatened the rear of the Italian army. Above all, the soldiers' families, with their insufficient separation allowances, received in every village of the Peninsula the aid of the American Red Cross, a fact which reacted most favourably on the tone of the army at the front.

Thus the able and distinguished men whom America sent to Italy as chiefs of her Red Cross, backed by unlimited funds, helped Orlando greatly in the work of removing the discontent of the country and spreading a sense that time and victory were on the side of the Allies, because America was coming along. I have said that in 1917 the Italians appreciated but little the power and purpose of America in the war.* But in 1918 it gradually became their prevailing idea, until America much more than filled up to them the blank left by Russia, and gave a warm assurance of ultimate victory. It was good to see the Italians taking to these brave newcomers, who spoke our tongue, and were always the best of friends to us.

Though in November our Unit could resume work only on a small scale, by the spring we had replaced most of the ambulances which we had lost in battle or

* See p. 139 above.

retreat.* From February onwards we maintained our stations in the plain with the Third Army on the Middle Piave, and other stations in the hills with the First Army far to north and west. Our base and garage were at the Villa Trieste, in the Euganean Hills near Arquà, the well-chosen seat of Petrarch's old age.

In February our hill stations were at Puffele and the neighbourhood, serving the Asiago front. On the days of our arrival on the plateau the deep snow came at last, with a driving Arctic wind. It was very cold living in tents and holes in the limestone until we got our wooden huts set up. At that pinch we had reason to admire the way in which our Italian soldier-servants, though not professional cooks, would always produce a hot and succulent meal of *pasta* under apparently impossible conditions. It is one of the arts of the race, very useful in campaigning. I saw something of the front line over against Asiago town, in the romantic fir forests of the plateau, and was glad to find that the men in the trenches had warm huts, plenty of blankets, and better food than

* Our new cars were furnished principally by the Committee in Aid of Italian Wounded and its friends, in particular by the generous aid of the Silver Thimble Fund. In the last year, as in the earlier years of the war, Sir Walter Becker of Turin gave us liberal support. Our reconstitution and recovery after the Retreat were largely due to the efforts of the Car-Officer, Mr. Dyne, and the Adjutant, Mr. John Braithwaite.

the year before. Caporetto, in one of its aspects, had been a successful strike for better conditions of life for the *povero fante*. But there were still marked differences of treatment and *moral* observable between one division and its neighbour. It is very unsafe to generalize about the Italian army.

We had hardly settled into our new work and quarters, when we were turned out again by the arrival on the Asiago plateau of the French and English forces, who in March took on this, perhaps the most critical point in the Italian line. As we served only the Italians, we shifted ground, moving our hill stations into the service of the 10th Army Corps at Arsiero, and of the 5th Army Corps in Vallarsa, on the two sides of the Pasubio massif. We now saw for the first time the real high-Alpine war, differing almost as much from the life on the Asiago plateau as from that on the plain of the Piave itself. Our work lay, of course, at the foot of the *teleferiche*, or aerial railways, which fed the war on those astonishing rock citadels: the sick and wounded came down the wires in cages, hundreds of feet in air. Arsiero,* situated near the junction of the Posina and upper Astico torrents, lies at the very foot of Monte Cimone, an acropolis of immense proportions then occu-

* See Maps IV. and XII.

pied by the Austrians. They could almost have thrown stones, and they could fire machine guns, into the streets of Arsiero from their perch 3,000 feet overhead. The Italian line defending the town hung on to an isolated pinnacle of rock, as grotesque a position as anything depicted in Captain Bairnsfather's Italian tour. Arsiero itself was deserted ; but two houses were still inhabited by our friends of the Sanità when our men first came to live with them in March 1918. They were soon afterwards shelled out of them, and the whole party moved into huts close under the edge of the cliff, in which a cavern capable of holding several hundred wounded was excavated and fitted up.

One day I visited the Pria Fora * mountain on the other side of the valley. The Austrians had stormed it in May 1916 when it was wholly unfortified ; but they were not likely to do so again, for its massive rock summit had now been excavated into a labyrinthine fortress, with four storeys of galleries one above the other, each grinning with cannon and machine guns. There were also mediæval-looking wooden machines for pouring volleys of rocks down the gullies by which the enemy

* Pria Fora—" Pietra forata," the perforated rock, so called on account of a natural archway in the rock crest, far seen against the skyline from both sides of the mountain.

might attempt to ascend. The artillery pointed out to us similar rock fortresses of the Austrians several miles away to the north. The most experienced of the Alpini officers, who had taken part in the heroic defence of trenchless Monte Grappa in the last November, told us that they did not see how either side could possibly advance through the higher Alps now that they had been fortified, if the defenders offered any serious resistance.

The Ninth Division, whom we served here in the Astico valley, had a "trench paper" called the *Astico*, written and illustrated entirely by officers and men. It contained capital stuff and a great variety of artistic talent, much better than many more pretentious papers. It was an attractive little item in the great patriotic propaganda of the year 1918.

At our other mountain out-station, Vallarsa,* we ourselves lived on high ground, though still at the foot of the *teleferiche*. Here we lay in Austrian territory, beyond the Piano delle Fugazze, or Dolomiti Pass, on the north side of the watershed, looking down the vale to Rovereto and Trent. The Pasubio massif, over 7,000 feet high, towered above us, bounding the valley to the east. Pasubio, though in Austrian territory, had been

* See Maps I. and IV.

held by the Alpini all through the war, saving Italy in May 1916 and November 1917. On its southern and western faces it presented the most superb range of Dolomite chimneys and pinnacles to the view. From our hut door in the Val di Prigione—a colossal " Dungeon Ghyll "—we looked up at dawn to the world of George Meredith's " Hymn to Colour," where " rocks raised clear horns on a transforming sky." Although on each of these horns companies or batteries were hidden away, and, in some, men were burrowing and counter-mining against each other, and swinging themselves about on ropes to give or take sudden death, the war was here a thing so much smaller than nature that in Vallarsa the whole grim business only set off the mountain glory in which it was framed.

It seemed fitting, therefore, that one of the approaches to the Corno pillar rock, the chief bone of contention in Vallarsa when we were there, should be called by the Italians after Battisti himself. For there that gallant gentleman had been captured by the Austrians as he headed an attempt on Corno. Socialist, idealist, patriot, and man of intellect and refinement, Cesare Battisti has nobly closed the long roll of Italy's political martyrs. His soul seemed to haunt the rocks of Pasubio, pointing down towards Trento, where they had hanged

him for a traitor. Now they are justly paid ; they and their worm-eaten bogey-show of mediæval gibbets have been kicked bag and baggage over the Brenner, and trampled out of sight by their own subjects in every corner of the ramshackle empire which they have filled with blood and wailing and oppression for too many generations past.* Austria-Hungary is now an "historical expression."

It was in Vallarsa that we came across General Boriani, then commanding the 29th Division, one of the remarkable personalities of the Italian army, with his six wound stripes and his brooding, fiery impetuosity on all subjects, tempered by an extraordinary good humour and hospitality of which our men were the beneficiaries. Under his auspices the Alpine Arditi, by a wonderful feat of military and gymnastic valour, effected the capture of the Corno pillar rock, attempted in vain by Battisti and so many others. Here, too, we had the pleasure of working with Colonel Cirieci, a model medical officer for a difficult mountain district, always going the difficult rounds on Pasubio, in constant thought and action

* The fondness of the official Austro-Hungarian mind for gallows work is amazing. In the pursuit in November 1918 we found in their quarters, more than once, collections of photographs and negatives of various pitiful executions of Czechs, Bosnians, Serbs, etc. I hope that those who treasured them, like the present turn of events!

for the health of the troops. The men and scenery were both fine that summer in Vallarsa.*

We now enjoyed so many close connections of service and friendship in so many different divisions spread over so wide an area of mountain and plain, that, constantly talking to people of all ranks, we acquired a conception of the trend of feeling in large portions of the Italian army. In general there was a strong upward curve in *moral* throughout the year 1918; but it was not a regular curve, especially not in the first half of the year. In some places and at some times the men's spirits were confessedly *molto in basso*. Sometimes some of them would say resignedly, "Oh, the Austrians will be here next week." The worst moment was the end of March and beginning of April, when the news of the British disaster in France made the knees of the weak as water. If the Austrians had made at the beginning of April the general offensive which they put off till the end of June, the result might possibly have been different. But when it became evident that the Germans had not got through to Amiens or the Channel ports, people got accustomed to hearing of German offensives that went a certain distance but never *fino al fondo*.

* It amused us to think that our mess in Vallarsa was probably the only British mess on enemy territory in Europe.

Between the middle of April and the middle of June the Italian army began to be affected by a new idea—namely, that the enemy's *moral* was worse than their own, and that Austria-Hungary was politically in process of dissolution. The Pact of Rome, concluded early in April between the Italian and Jugo-Slav leaders, was the prelude to a systematic propaganda among the enemy forces, ably organized by Italian Intelligence officers, and zealously carried out by ex-prisoners belonging to the oppressed races of Austria-Hungary. In No Man's Land, musical Czechs serenaded their compatriots with Bohemian songs, and set gramophones going instead of machine guns. The Czecho-Slovaks, in Italian uniform, with the Bohemian national colours of white and red in their Alpino hats, became a common and favourite sight upon the roads. This new way of envisaging the war went well with the ever-increasing importance of America in the mind's eye of the Italian soldier. The new National Internationalism of Mr. Wilson and his Fourteen Points vaguely adumbrated a broader outlook and a brighter age ahead, beginning with a better chance of winning the war. There seemed a new tide in the world's affairs, and Giuseppe vaguely felt that he was a part of it, while the enemy was fighting against the future. By the time that the Austrians

tardily launched their great offensive, the Italian soldiers had an idea that their own *moral* was at least as good as the enemy's. And in military *moral* there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.

When the Austrian blow fell at last there was no half measure about it. Although the internal condition of the Empire, political and economic, was even worse than we knew, the authorities believed that they could win such a victory as would relieve their almost desperate situation. But for this purpose the victory must this time be decisive. Their generals planned and their army confidently expected to go straight through at the first rush to Treviso, where they had allotted houses for the different regiments and officers. After that they believed that Italy's resistance would collapse.

The offensive was launched with equal fury along an unbroken line of attack stretching from the Asiago front opposite the British, right round by Grappa, the Montello, and the course of the Piave down to the sea.* At dawn on June 15th it began along this great stretch of ground with a bombardment of terrible efficiency. Some of the British officers told me they had never seen better shooting or a hotter barrage in France. The result was

* See Maps XI. and XII. for this battle.

that early that morning the Austrians carried with little resistance almost the whole front line of the Allies from Asiago to the marshes at the Piave mouth.

But their success on the mountains was short lived. The British, furious at losing any ground to the Austrians, drove them out again with fearful slaughter, and pursued them into their own lines, where all resistance ceased. The reaction of the French and Italians on the mountain front was also very rapid. Between Piave and Brenta, on the Grappa massif, the Austrians had begun by storming positions which commanded Bassano and threatened the whole line. But Diaz now knew that the proper reply to the new Ludendorff tactics of "infiltration" was instant counter-attacks, and these were carried out with magnificent vigour and success.

By the end of the second day all was well over in the mountain area. But on the low, long "mound" of the Montello and in the plain of the Piave the battle continued for another week of desperate and uncertain fighting. On the morning of the 15th the Austrians had crossed the Piave. In the north they had taken and held nearly half the Montello, and again farther down the course of the river, on both sides of Ponte di Piave and Santa Dona, they had securely lodged themselves on the further shore, and had pushed on

from two to four miles, threatening to break through to Treviso.

It was in this part of the battle that we worked, doing front-line service for the wounded of the 11th Army Corps, to north and south of the trunk road leading from Treviso to Ponte di Piave. By sending up our reserves and drawing away cars from the Pasubio district, where battle was refused,* we increased the number of our ambulances from eight to twenty before the end of the action, and carried in the week 4,500 wounded, of whom about 2,000 were stretcher cases. The army corps had a two-division front, and employed five divisions in all, three to south, where the fight was hottest, and two to north. This meant that in the area of severest fighting there was a change of men twice in the eight days. The Austrians also changed their regiments, but how often I cannot say.

To my unprofessional eye it seemed that the battle was admirably fought where I saw it, and that the Italian officers, from the generals downwards, had it thoroughly in hand. It was an anxious affair, because the enemy's tactics of " infiltration " had the immense

* What we did on the small scale Diaz at the same time did on the great. He took the fullest advantage of the " inner line " and brought forces of all arms across from the mountains of the west and north to the Piave plain, the Fiat lorries as usual playing a great part.

advantage that no one could see clearly more than twenty yards in front of him in that gardenlike plain, where rows of vines and fruit trees in full leaf, all running from north to south, parallel with the fighting line, formed a series of low screens, ten or twenty yards apart. Except down the roads and the railway there were no avenues of vision. Neither were the Italians fighting in prepared lines of defence, as they had lost their first line on the river bank when the battle began, and were never driven back as far as their second. Both sides had equally little advantage of ground, and fought behind dyke banks, in ditches and drains, or in improvised trenches scratched in the soft soil.

Naturally under these conditions the battle was always swaying to and fro in rushes and rallies. The cry was perpetually being raised of an enemy "infiltration" in such and such a part of the blind garden battle; and on these occasions the danger was of panic. After the Caporetto experience the divisional, brigade, and regimental officers were all keenly on the lookout to stop the slightest sign of it, and I saw more than one incipient panic, due to an enemy "infiltration," very promptly and ably dealt with. Above all, the reserves were well handled, here locally as well as by Diaz on the grand scale. The Bersaglieri ciclisti were hurried up on their

" push bikes " along the lanes to the threatened spot time after time, and never in vain.

We worked up to the regimental dressing-stations as close to the line as the roads permitted ; and since the line was often shifting forwards or backwards, the work was not without excitement. The Ford ambulances, of which we had latterly acquired a fair number, were admirably suited to pushing up the narrow country lanes closed to all other cars by shell-holes, and it often surprised and pleased the infantry and Bersaglieri to find that we could thus keep pace with them. Meanwhile our big Talbots ran up and down the great trunk road, ending up, at the victorious finale of the battle, on the Piave bank beside the great broken bridge, amid the polyglot litter of the departed enemy. The medical and staff officers of each successive division had co-operated with us in the most practical manner, and were most appreciative of our efforts to get the wounded quickly off the field. On the basis of their reports, the Military Medical Board of the Italian Army published a eulogium of our work during the battle.

The Austrians had brought a few light cannon across the Piave, but generally speaking their excellent artillery had had to stay on the farther shore. And since they had lost the mastery of the air, thanks not a little to the

British airmen in the spring,* they could not get sufficient information as to how to direct their fire in accordance with the changing phases of the battle on the Italian side of the river. They adopted the policy of plumping big shells on the country lanes, of which they had the accurate range, thereby often blocking them for a time. But the Italians, always careful of their road communications, were quick to fill up the holes. As compared with San Gabriele or Vodice, it was a battle of machine-gun and rifle wounds, at least for the Italians.

Thus, though the river had been crossed by the Austrian infantry, it was still the Italians' great defence. The midsummer rain fell, the river rose, and the foot-bridges, always under the fire of the Italian artillery and of aeroplanes, Italian and British, became each day a more precarious means of sending over men, food, and rifle ammunition. Towards the end of the week the enemy prisoners complained of hunger and eagerly ate the loaves shared with them by their kindly captors. As the Italians held their ground more firmly than

* In twelve months in Italy the British destroyed 386 enemy aeroplanes and twenty-seven balloons, besides thirty-three machines driven down out of control. This is a large proportion of the not very great Austrian total of aircraft. The British loss for the year was forty-seven machines missing and three balloons destroyed.

ever, the Austrians, eight days after they had crossed the river, slipped back across it under cover of night.

Then we all knew that Italy had been saved, and we rejoiced together. But we did not know that Austro-Hungary had no less surely been doomed, and must now disappear from the category of States. Diaz' defensive victory of June 1918 may be added to the long list of " decisive battles of the world."

EPILOGUE.

THE FINAL VICTORY.

The Devil sought dominion,
And the clouds were filled with thunder;
We could hear his clanging pinion
As the peoples fled asunder;
But his legions now are stalling,
His iron thrones are falling,
We can hear the nations calling
For the bright, broad day.

G. W. Y., December 1918.

THIS book, as I have explained in the Preface, had already been one-third of it written in the leisure of last autumn in Italy, while the great news from France, the Balkans, and Turkey was pouring in every day, raising our hopes of a present deliverance. At the same time a series of political revolutions were overthrowing the old Austro-Hungarian State, which, having come to subsist on Prussian victories, now looked up unfed. It had been going about deadly sick, ever since one of its twin Premiers had publicly confessed to a complete repulse and a loss of 100,000 * men in the June offen-

* The Italians reckoned the enemy loss at 200,000.

sive on the Piave. So during the autumn the old Austria-Hungary passed quietly away, and by a process more like that of nature's growth than of man's violence, was dissolved into the vigorous and turbulent races of which it had been composed.

But though the Austro-Hungarian State was dead, the Austro-Hungarian army was still alive. And it was the army alone that had ever given real unity to the Empire. Men remembered that in 1848, when there had been a similar crisis, the army under Radetzky, having triumphed in Italy, restored the fallen State for another seventy years. It might, indeed, be hoped that on this occasion the tide of time had set in more strongly against the Dynasts; and it was certain that the British had broken the Hindenburg Line, the enemy's backbone. But there still stood firm in its positions the Austro-Hungarian army, the epitome of the coercive union of the races who were politically flying asunder. Until the army was destroyed the old system was still in being.

The battle that was fought and won in the last week of October was to prove how an army will go on fighting just because it is an army; how it will fight well until it suffers a decided reverse, and will then, and only then, go completely to bits for political and moral

reasons. If the Austrians had held the Piave line on October 27–29, 1918, their army would not have disintegrated ; and conversely, if the Italians had defeated Radetzky at Custozza, the army might then have broken up for political reasons, and the Emperor Franz-Josef might have reigned a few months instead of seventy years. In time of revolution the winning or losing of battles counts not less but more than in times of stable government.

In the early days of October Diaz and Badoglio had already made their plan for the destruction of the Austrian forces.* The main break-through was to be effected by the crossing of the Middle Piave on both sides of the Montello by the Twelfth, Eighth, and Tenth Italian Armies, the last-named being commanded

* See the official Italian dispatch on the battle, recently published. I here quote the following sentences from Lord Cavan's dispatch (*Times*, December 5, 1918) :—" On October 6th I went to Comando Supremo at General Diaz' request. General Diaz at this interview offered me the command of a mixed Italian-British army with the view of undertaking offensive operations at an early date. I expressed my high appreciation of the honour conferred on me.

" On October 13th General Diaz held a conference of Army Commanders at Comando Supremo, at which he explained his plans for the forthcoming offensive.

" The general plan for the main attack was to advance across the Piave with the Tenth, Eighth, and Twelfth Italian Armies—to drive a wedge between Fifth and Sixth Austrian Armies—forcing the Fifth

by Lord Cavan, who brought down the greater part of his three British divisions from the Asiago plateau. (See Maps XI. and XII., pages 178, 198 above, for this chapter.)

But before the break-through on the Piave was attempted, the Fourth Italian Army began, at dawn on October 24th, a furious assault on the enemy's mountain positions on the Grappa massif between the Piave and the Brenta. This operation, though not itself immediately successful, served as a containing action to help the subsequent attacks across the river.

Army eastwards and threatening the communications of the Sixth Army running through the Valmarino Valley.

"The Fourth Army was simultaneously to take the offensive in the Grappa sector.

"The task allotted to the Tenth Army was to reach the Livenza between Portobuffole and Sacile, and thus protect the flank of the Eighth and Twelfth Armies in their move northwards.

"The co-ordination of the attacks of the Tenth, Eighth, and Twelfth Armies was entrusted to General Caviglia, the Commander of the Eighth Italian Army.

"On October 11th the Headquarters of the Tenth Army, the Army which had been placed under my command, were established near Treviso.

"The Tenth Army in the first instance was to consist of the 11th Italian and 14th British Corps."

Lord Cavan had succeeded General Plumer in command of the British forces in Italy when the latter went back to Ypres in March. Criticism is sometimes made of parts of British policy or want of policy in Italy during the war, especially as to propaganda, etc. At any rate the most important item of all, the choice of commanders for the British forces in Italy, was twice done to perfection. If any one could have replaced General Plumer it was Lord Cavan.

Similarly, in the Macedonian offensive, the British and Greeks had held the Bulgarians by their fiercely-contested onslaught at Doiran, which enabled the Serbians and French to carry through successfully their magnificent penetration of the line beyond Monastir. On the Grappa the Austrian army, so far from showing itself already in process of dissolution, resisted with the utmost tenacity. Some of the heights were captured and recaptured alternately eight times; the Arditi were thrown in again and again; and the Italians stood up day after day to losses as severe as those that their regiments had been accustomed to suffer in the great offensives on the Isonzo.

But the Fourth Army on Grappa was doing what was required of it, and meanwhile all three armies on the Piave succeeded in their objective. The Twelfth, where the Alpini and the French vied with each other in a fierce rivalry, fought its way up the Piave gorge and cut the communications of the Austrians, who were defending the Grappa massif, so that they too joined the general *débandade*.

The Eighth Army, working from the Montello, succeeded on October 27th in throwing a division across the Piave on their left, but failed on their right flank next to the British on account of bridging difficulties.

Things for a moment looked serious ; but prompt co-operation between the Allies saved the situation. On the night of October 27th–28th two divisions from the Eighth Army, under General Basso, passed over the British bridges to the south, erected and previously used by Lord Cavan's Tenth Army. But these bridges also gave way before the requisite force had crossed. General Basso, however, once across, turned northwards, and without reckoning his numbers or his isolated position, " with soldierly instinct," as Lord Cavan writes, attacked the enemy, and cleared the front of the Eighth Army, from which he had been detached. That army was thus enabled to cross the river and race forward over hill and dale to Vittorio, thence to cut the Valmarino communications of the enemy.

Meanwhile the Tenth Army, under Lord Cavan, the right wing of the whole attack, had enjoyed an even more rapid success. Lord Cavan's forces consisted of the 14th British Army Corps on the north, and on the south the 11th Italian Army Corps, with which our Unit was serving. In the Tenth Army sector, as indeed in front of the whole line of attack, the bed of the Piave was a mile and a half broad, consisting of islands of shingle and brushwood, divided by half a dozen or more channels of the river flowing " ten

miles an hour in time of flood," and "three and a half miles an hour at summer level." If, therefore, it rained heavily for many hours in the mountains above, the crossing would be impossible. And it was late in November! There was very little of "foregone conclusion" about the battle when it began.

On the night of October 23rd–24th, by a brilliant preliminary operation, the northern part of the largest island, the Grave di Papadopoli, was captured by the British infantry, who crossed the swirling flood in flat-bottomed boats, rowed by *pontieri* of the Italian *genio*. The way was thus prepared for the great attack by the English and the Italian corps of the Tenth Army on the night of October 26th–27th.

The preliminary bombardment began half an hour before midnight, and with it began the rain. It was an anxious business waiting by the river bank for the attack at dawn, knowing that if the rain did not stop—and why should it stop in November?—the whole scheme must miscarry. But stop it did, when the attack began, and it never rained again anywhere where I was till I had been a fortnight in Trieste, except for half an hour's drizzle on the morning of October 29th. The weather-god, like every one else, had begun to

Wilsoneggiare, as the Italian papers called the prevailing political tendency in Europe.

At 6.45 a.m., October 27th, the British and the Italians, under Lord Cavan's orders, moved to the attack, to capture the remaining part of the system of islands and the farther shore. A fair number of Italian and Austrian wounded were carried back across the river to our ambulances in the first twenty-four hours. But we saw less of this battle than of others at which we had assisted, because the infantry went right over the islands, through the swift channels that took their toll of them, and away across country beyond the river, leaving miles behind them every wheeled vehicle—artillery, supplies, and ambulances—unable to cross the channels until the bridges were made. The British bridges, as already recorded, broke down on the night of October 27th–28th; and the Italian bridges for carrying wheeled traffic, which were our concern, were only completed to the farther shore after dusk on the evening of October 28th.

On the afternoon of the 27th I had walked over to the farther bank by footbridges, passing on the islands a few corpses and many piles of Boche helmets thrown away wherever the Austrians had fled from the Italian attack. The infantry were already far forward, out of

sight even from the farther bank. On the morning of the 28th, Dyne and I walked into San Polo, a village two miles beyond the farther bank, and found all the Italians there in high spirits, though very hungry, captured Austrian cannon still facing down the street, and all the signs of recent fighting. But the line was somewhere far ahead.

On our way back we spoke to the officers of the Italian *genio*, who were working, tools in hands, with their men, to finish the bridges and let the artillery pass over that night. They told us that the final bridge would be ready at dusk. So Baker fetched up two Ford ambulances, the only motors that had any chance over such broken ground, and we waited on the spot while our friends of the *genio* finished the last bridge. We thus got over to the far shore with the two motor ambulances a couple of hours before any other wheeled vehicle crossed the river by the route of the 11th Army Corps. Then we fairly stuck for the night at the bottom of the muddy lane leading to San Polo.

The first things to follow over, before midnight, were British artillery, and horse ambulances, coming over by the Italian route, I suppose in return for the loan of the British bridges the night before to the Italians

from the Eighth Army. Certainly the Allies played in well together.

In the course of several hours between night and dawn we got our two Fords up that abominable lane, which seemed to be a long chain of shell craters filled with mud. So in the early hours of the 29th we arrived in San Polo. Baker took the cellars of its ruined château for our out-station, and the two cars began carrying back wounded from the front over the more practicable roads to the east; but from San Polo they had still for some days to come to be carried back by hand across the river. The Italian infantry we found on the morning of the 29th already far ahead, in more apparent danger from their own guns away behind the Piave than from any further enemy resistance in front.

In fact, the back of the business had been broken, as far as the Tenth Army was concerned, in the short, fierce struggle on the 27th, when the Austrians proved incapable of standing up to our men. They put up their last serious rearguard action on the evening of the 29th, after which, as Lord Cavan writes, "the defeat became a rout."

From this moment forward we had but few wounded to carry; but even so, the ambulances found it hard work merely to keep in touch with the Bersaglieri of

the 23rd and the infantry of the 37th Divisions in their wild rush to the Tagliamento and beyond. Our difficulty was every one's difficulty, the fact that the retiring Austrians had blown up the bridges over the series of rivers, though happily, in their haste, not quite all of them. Both British and Italian troops suffered severely from want of food, especially in the early days of the crossing, because the wheeled traffic could not keep up with the infantry any faster than the pontoons could be slung over the rivers. One began, by hard experience, to understand many of the minor but all-important reasons why the enemy had followed up so slowly over the same ground a year before; and then it had been pouring and the rivers flooded whereas now the weather at least was perfect.

The Austrian armies were now everywhere in flight and dissolution. The enemy's divisions in line had mostly fought well, but the Czechs and Poles in reserve scarcely fired a shot, and surrendered wholesale on being dispatched to relieve the broken divisions. Once the retreat set in, *moral* gave way throughout, except among some of the German-Austrians. Even the Magyars wished only to get back to defend their new independent State. The fairly won military success of the Twelfth, Eighth, and Tenth Armies, operating on the political

situation, had cleared an almost unopposed field of advance in mountain and plain for all the other armies of Italy. The way to Trent and Trieste was open.

They were wonderful and happy days for every one, those days of the great deliverance, with the barbarian once more fleeing from the soil sacred through the centuries to the Latin race. But only we who had traversed the same roads in such bitterness of spirit twelve months before could feel it to the full. " O giornate del nostro riscatto ! " The inhabitants of Veneto and Friuli, after their year of servitude, were going about in happy crowds, hundreds together, men, women, and children, unable to do anything but laugh and talk with their liberators, who, themselves radiant with delight, were many of them wearing evergreen branches in token of victory.

Every day, as we advanced, we met ever longer columns of weedy prisoners, their hands deep in their grey overcoat pockets, shepherded in thousands at a time by two or three cheerful Tommies, or two or three majestic mounted Carabinieri. Many, I think, had " bowed the head for bread " rather than remain with a starving army or return to a starving land. On the side of every road and in every market town stood the yellow cannon and lorries, and all the deserted gear of the disbanding hosts. And in the ditches along every

high road and lane between the Piave islands and Trieste the soldiers had thrown away their "Dolly Varden" Boche helmets; sometimes sooner, sometimes later in the flight each man had divested himself of that heavy badge of servitude. So it was given us to see "proud Austria rammed to wreck."

On the night of November 2nd it chanced that I had a long way to walk back beyond the Piave, not wishing to take the car back over the bridge. I was walking under the stars through the scenes of our June battle, ghostly in the starlight. As I went, I became aware of a singing and cheering all around for miles away. I was quite alone, and could only guess its significance; but when at last I struck our old Treviso main road, I asked the first group of soldiers I met what was the meaning of the still-continued, universal shout. They told me that the Austrians had sent a general to the Comando Supremo to ask for an armistice. I shall never forget the distant and continuous noise of a whole army scattered over the plain, shouting all night in its joy under the glistening winter stars because their warfare was accomplished, and Europe at last was free.

During these days, for the first time since I had been in Italy, I heard that Austrian prisoners had been insulted, though never injured. This new feeling of

personal anger against the Austrian soldiery as human beings did not last long among their good-natured captors. It was entirely due to the tales told by the liberated populations of robbery and ill-treatment. The stories of the inhabitants, of which I heard many, were all of the same tenor. All their cattle and all the food that they produced had been taken and never paid for, while they themselves had been kept on a very low ration. Again, as in Shelley's day, the peasant of the Venetian plain had

> " heaped his grain
> In the garner of his foe."

Everything movable of any value had been packed up and sent off into Austria-Hungary. The robbery of the whole countryside for the benefit of the conquerors had been organized and official; but there had not been a systematized destruction of what could not be taken off, such as the Germans had carried out in France.

As to personal treatment, they all spoke of their year's taskmasters as *brutte bestie*. They had no other word for them in any village between Piave and Isonzo. They all said the Magyars (" Ungaresi ") were the worst brutes, which, from what I heard and saw in Serbia in 1914, did not surprise me. The Croats, Bohemians, and even German-Austrian privates had as a rule be-

haved tolerably. The worst tyranny had come from the officers, especially the higher officers, and, most of all, the allied officers of Germany proper, who had always urged harsh treatment. God grant that that type of "higher officer" may now disappear out of Austria and out of Europe. It has caused enough misery for one planet in one æon.

Our own Villa Trento presented a sorry sight, when we reached it a day or two after the armistice came into force, as it did at 3 p.m. November 4th. The Villa had been gutted from roof to cellar, and with no gentle hand. Filth and military litter were all that there was between the bare walls of that once fair mansion. Outside its gates five deserted Austrian cannon stood, as if doing penance for the sack. Among our old friends of the neighbouring peasantry, the women and children had survived, though starved and robbed; but many of the fathers of families had been carried off into slavery in Hungary, and, alas! some had not returned even in December. Whether and how they died will probably never be known. One grotesque story was told us: at the Retreat, we left behind at the Villa certain pigs that we had been fattening for Christmas, 1917. Some Hungarian soldiers, we now learned, had eaten of them voraciously on their first arrival, and died next day! A

military inquest had been held, to inquire if the English had poisoned the pigs. But the *post-mortem* showed that death had resulted solely from the greed and voracity of starved men let loose on abundant and succulent fare.

Between Piave and Tagliamento the Austrians in their flight had left their hospitals doctorless, foodless, and in the last stage of human misery, just as they had done in Northern Serbia when the Serbs drove them out of it in November 1914. Over four years, the one sight forcibly recalled to me the other. In the several Austrian hospitals that I visited, the situation had been to some extent saved by the gallant work of Italian civilian women of the locality, who, though untrained, had stuck to their grim post, helping their wounded persecutors in their dreadful plight, before the British and Italian armies were able to come to the rescue.

Another of the many forms taken by the misery that needs "must be at every famous victory," was the suffering of hundreds of thousands of Italian prisoners, freed before the armistice by the revolutions in the lands of their captivity, and now escaping for their lives out of starving Austria, where a fifth of their number had perished. On every road we met them by thousands, patiently plodding along while strength to walk was in

them, finding themselves still in an almost foodless land so long as they were east of the broken railway bridges of Piave and Tagliamento. We were beginning to emerge, more clearly every day as we moved eastward, out of the problems of the finished war into the new tasks of the armistice, the settling of the starving and disorganized peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. Each day we learnt by fresh proof what a grim weapon had been wielded in the British blockade.

Now that we were well inside the enemy's lines, we saw on every hand traces of that terrible pressure—for instance, in the condition of the main roads beyond the Piave, cut to pieces by the heavy iron tyres of the motors, for want of rubber, and left unmended for want of well-fed workmen. Instead of repairing them the Austrians preferred to run light railways along the side of some of the larger roads. The Italians, who trusted to their Fiat lorries for supply, at once got to work on repairing the road surface, and in a week had transformed conditions of transport in Venetia and Friuli. So, too, behind the enemy's Piave battle front, we had found very little work done on trench preparation. The Italians had done infinitely more on the other side of the river. The want of labour, and of food to strengthen labour's hands, had clearly been a main weakness of

Austria for a year past. When we got back into our old fighting area of the Isonzo, its ruins were as untouched as if we had left it only a week before. Much of the Italian ammunition had been left for a year, lying by the roadside, as though for want of strength to pick it up and carry it away.

In the relief of all the various kinds of human suffering that lay around us, Sir Courtauld Thomson, the Chief Commissioner of the British Red Cross in the Mediterranean, took a most active personal part, with very beneficent results. All who had the privilege of serving under Sir Courtauld that autumn have the same feeling of gratitude for his sure support in all difficulties, his wise and considerate guidance, and the social pleasures of his hospitality and friendship.

Our part was now drawing to an end. One of our ambulances, advancing with the division from Arsiero, had entered Trento, and had carried back patients from half-way up the Brenner. But we had withdrawn the rest of our cars from the mountains in order to head for Trieste, the goal that we had come out to seek more than three years before. The last of my " Scenes from Italy's War " shall be the view that Geoffrey Young and I had at midday on November 9, 1918, when our

touring car came suddenly round a corner on a cliff above the blue Adriatic, and there down below us, three miles away, lay Trieste, her port and her city, united to her mother Italy after many years of longing and four years of fear and blood. We two had together sought so long to come there and to see just this sight, and now we had got through, and there indeed it lay, a sure and visible sign of the wide and universal victory that had been won for the people and by the people of Italy, of England, and of all the struggling world.

List of Italian Losses in the War.

The Supreme Army Command announces that the total losses suffered by the Italian army on all fronts during the war were as follows :—

Killed . . 460,000, including 16,362 officers.

Wounded . 947,000, including 33,347 officers.

On fronts other than the Italian the losses were :—

Killed 7,934

Wounded 15,196

It is estimated that the number of men totally or partially disabled owing to wounds or illness contracted at the front exceeds half a million.

Owing to the emigration of so many millions, principally of males economically active, Italy when the war broke out contained only 34,671,000 souls, of whom only 8,931,000 were males from eighteen to sixty-five years old. Of these she mobilized more than 5,000,000.

The British Red Cross in Italy carried during the war 400,000 sick and wounded at the front. Our Unit carried of these 177,522, of whom 40,918 were stretcher cases, and our Unit cars ran 1,319,316 kilometres.

INDEX.

THE END.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY T. NELSON AND SONS, LTD.

154619 HMod.
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Author Trevelyan, George Macaulay

Title Scenes from Italy's war.

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